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LTIMATE MOMENT

BY WILLIAM R. LIGHTON

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"'MAYBE THE LAST TIME,' HE SAID, SOFTLY"

THE ULTIMATE MOMENT

BY

WILLIAM R. LIGHTON

ILLUSTRATED BY

A. I. KELLER

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TO

THE MEMORY OF

MY FATHER

ILLUSTRATIONS

"'MAYBE THE LAST TIME,' HE SAID, SOFTLY" *Frontispiece*

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THE ULTIMATE MOMENT

THE ULTIMATE MOMENT

I

IT was mid-October in the Elkhorn valley of Nebraska. Through the long summer the round, full breasts of the hills had faithfully suckled a big family of crops; but now the matured grain had gone away to begin its own career, leaving the mother-prairie alone. She seemed to feel the release from responsibility without quite knowing whether to be glad or sorry to surrender it. The look of the burden-bearer was gone from her face; she was even showing some furtive tokens of the jocund humors of a belated youth, such as patient women show whose first real enjoyment of personal freedom comes only after the long cares of maternity. She was resting at ease, indolently amusing herself with a big lapful of sunshine, while insisting by every means in her power that she had not lost strength or purpose. She was ruled by a desire that may not be reconciled with itself—the desire for a long life without old age.

THE ULTIMATE MOMENT

From appearances none would have cared to say that her vigor was gone. She had come to October, as one comes to the sweet hours of evening after a weary day, with spirit rekindled and eager. The sky was as unfathomable as in June, the air as odorous and vital. The sun had lost the heat of passionate summer, to be sure, but the loss was a gain in cheer and comfort. The cornfields had put off their workaday dress of plain, serviceable green, and had made an exquisite toilet from the clinging fabric of wild morning-glory vines. The meadow-lands that had been brown and dull in the drought of August had bloomed afresh after the September rains, and were thickly flecked with purple and golden glory—asters and thoroughwort, sensitive pea and golden-rod. The uplands were treeless; but in the deep heart of the valley the Elkhorn wound its leisurely way among heavy masses of elm, cotton-wood, and box-elder, whose leafage showed no blight of frost upon its lusty green. Even the birds seemed confused about the season. On their feeding-ground in the wheat-stubble meadow-larks and goldfinches gurgled and choked with sheer ecstasy; a flock of jays swung through the high air, screaming in a madness of demoniac delight; the melancholy crows, who dared not openly affront the day with their grouchy temper, gorged themselves in silence. Far as the senses could reach, the land was holding carnival of joyous abandon.

THE ULTIMATE MOMENT

David Boughton had been hard at work since early dawn, ploughing in the "hill eighty"; but now the last furrow was turned, and he let the tired horses stand for a time, while he leaned against the plough-handles, pushing back his hat so that the slow south wind might touch his forehead, wet with sweat. As he stood looking with something like artistic satisfaction over the freshly turned, black surface of the field, and then at the fair breadth of prospect beyond, he felt himself a part of the day, his heart and mind firmly linked to every token of its beauty. At their best those moments come only to the worker; and David had done a man's day's work, whose tangible result lay outspread before him.

A quail called from the thicket of weeds that grew along the fence, and David answered with a shrill, imitative whistle, again and again, until he had seduced the bird into a response; then, with practised lips, he took a broader part in the riotous symphony that swelled around him, whistling with the larks, the bobolinks, and the finches; but at the clanging, defiant note of the jay he stopped.

"No," he said, aloud. "I know how you feel, old boy, but I'm not up to it yet. Maybe I shall be, some day." He settled his hat more firmly, giving to its brim an impudent upward tilt. "See that, Mr. Jay?" he laughed. "That's the way *I* feel. I'm just as good a man as you

are, even if I can't make the same kind of a racket."

After a moment he glanced askance at the westering sun. "Half-past four!" he said, still aloud, in the manner of one long used to solitary association with his own simple, wholesome thoughts. "Is that all? I'll bet a dollar it's later than that. I'm hungry as a hound pup. I reckon there won't be much supper to-night, either, till pretty late."

He drove the team to the rude gate in the field fence, and there loosed the beasts from the plough. As he struggled with the clumsy fastening of the gate, he paused, as though upon unexpected impulse, and his face was sobered.

"Maybe the last time," he said, softly. He set his elbows upon the gate-post, his chin supported in his open palms, and his eyes wandered again, but more seriously and with keener perception, over the familiar landscape. Here and there other workers were engaged as he had been, and the surface of the prairie was checkered with patches of new earth—a mammoth board laid out ready for the great game of Industry. At wider intervals lazy clouds of blue smoke hung above fields of burning stubble, melting high in air into a mellow haze. Scores of sleek cattle were dotted about in their pastures, grazing. In the sheltered nooks among the hills were many farm-yards, holding big, red barns and small, white dwellings —homes of content in a land of plenty. It was a

beautiful picture, and David's glance clung to it fondly. The horses, left to their own whims, had strayed far before he aroused himself and hurried to overtake them. He straightened the disarranged harness, caught the trailing lines into one firm hand, and set off towards the barn-yard that lay a half-mile below at the bottom of the valley.

His soberer mood held him for a time. "Lord!" he said, quietly. "It's mighty strange how a man learns to love one particular little patch of dirt more than all the rest of the world just because he's learned to call it home."

But there is an irrepressible buoyancy in the very sorrows of robust, red-blooded youth. In another moment his blue eyes were quickened, alert, and his lips surrendered to a smile as he chirruped to the horses, urging them to mend their plodding steps.

"Hike, there!" he called. "Hike, Jenny! Joe! What are you slouching for? Lift your feet!"

For himself, he moved with the loose, free, rolling stride of the man whose legs are used to ploughed ground. He was tall, with the yielding straightness of strong, unconfined muscles whose every fibre was alive. His head was firmly set upon a stalwart, sun-browned neck, and was held high, as though to allow him to look squarely into the face of things. His shoulders, beneath his loose-fitting shirt of gray flannel, had that indescribable elastic lift which gives assurance of virility. His whole body swung in lithe harmony

with his step. That gait loses its fine grace upon the harsh pavements of a city's streets, but in the fields, its birthplace, it is the perfection of human movement.

"Glory, but it's a great day!" he cried, and his deep lungs sucked greedily at the rich air. A grasshopper lifted itself with a rattle of wings from the matted weeds at his feet, and he watched its long, easy flight with genuine sympathy. A striped snake, roused from a sun-bath, moved indolently out of his path, stopping now and again to poise its head in defiance and to mock with its flickering, scarlet tongue. Instinctively David stooped and picked up a clod of earth; but he checked his hand with a little gesture of renunciation.

"Not to-day! You may thank your stars, you belly-crawler, that I'm going away. I couldn't kill a thing on the place—the last day."

He passed from the field into a winding lane formed by a double row of giant cotton-woods, their tops interlocked far overhead, and presently he came to the barred gate of the pasture-lot. A half-dozen cows stood just beyond the fence, waiting for the bars to be lowered, and a queer little old man was puttering over this easy task, making it seem vastly hard.

"Hello, Uncle Billy!" David called. "Do you let your cows quit work this time o' day?"

The other paused in his effort, straightening the stiff kinks from his bent back, wheezing

under the distressful aches of rheumatic muscles.

"Yep," he answered, shortly. Then, as he found a comfortable posture: "By 'Mighty, young feller, I'll be glad when you git away. I don't like this thing of choppin' off a day's work right in the middle; an' seems as if every livin' critter about the place has felt free to loaf this last two-three days. Why don't you go, if you're goin', an' be done with it?" But a broad grin offset the rigor of his words, and his glance rested kindly upon the sturdy young figure.

David let down the bars and turned the cows into the lane, then stood leaning against the fence, finding the cool shade of the cotton-woods very grateful.

"How you feeling, anyway, Uncle Billy?" he asked.

"Fine—fine!" the old man answered, stoutly. "Feelin' just as young an' hearty as I ever did. What's the sense feelin' any other way?"

But, despite this assurance, he was plainly much in debt to age—a well-dried little man, who appeared to have been made in the beginning of his life out of indifferent material, full of knots and tough places. His body was weazened and misshapen, his hands gnarled, his shrunken cheeks seamed and cross-seamed and stained with the ineradicable rust of years. A mantle of white hair fell about his shoulders, and beneath his chin was a thin fringe of wiry white beard—as though the

skeleton hand of Age was gripping him visibly by the throat. He limped painfully, resting his light weight upon a crutch which his own hand had fashioned from an elm-branch. Yet, over all this, his eyes were very clear and lively beneath their thatch of snowy brows, and were alight with the assurance that he loved life with undiminished ardor.

"What have you been doing all day, Uncle Billy?" David asked, laying his hand almost caressingly upon the bent old shoulder.

"Oh, I been patchin' up the hog fence," the old fellow returned. "When there ain't nothin' else to do, there's always that." His sunken eyes sparkled with a glint of humor. "I reckon you 'ain't learnt yet what curious critters hogs is. It takes till a man's old to learn that, an' then he don't know it all. I just been figurin' it out: I fenced in that hog lot twenty-two year ago last May, an' I been spendin' all my spare time on it ever since, patchin' it up." The spark of humor flickered into a smile. "The *the*ory's all right. It's plum easy to *build* a hog-tight fence; but 'tain't no manner o' use tryin' to keep the hogs from gettin' through it. Ever thought about how that is?"

David laughed, lightly, easily, with the recklessness of one who draws upon an inexhaustible fund of good-humor. "Just like folks, ain't they, Uncle Billy?"

"That's a true word! More like folks than any

livin' critters there is. A man can understand a hog. Nobody knows what a horse or a cow or a hen thinks; but you know what a hog thinks, just from lookin' at him. He thinks, 'I will if I want to, an' if I don't I won't.' Ain't that human?"

"That's me, to the life!" David returned. "I'm so like, I reckon I ought to be shut up in the lot with 'em, oughtn't I?"

Uncle Billy made an inarticulate sound in his throat. "Time you been down to Omaha for a spell, you'll think a hog lot ain't such a bad place as it might be, mebbe." Then, after a moment, his quavering voice almost querulous: "Name o' sense, Dave, I can't make out why you want to quit us here. Seems too dummed bad that you should be the one to get these here high-mighty notions about goin' up to town."

"I'm going to get rich," said David, lightly parrying the old man's threat of oppressive seriousness. "Just think, Uncle Billy, how nice it 'll be. By the time you get to be ninety or a hundred, I'll have a fat old wad put away in the bank, and then you can quit work."

Uncle Billy worked his crutch into position beneath his arm, gathering his poor muscles for action. "When the Lord wants me to quit work He'll strike me blind an' deef an' dumb, an' cripple both my legs, and knot my hands up so's I can't wiggle my fingers. He 'ain't done none o' them things yet; so I reckon He means me to keep on like I been doin. I'm willin'. I've always

been one o' the workin' kind. To hell with your wad!" The little oath was so earnest that it seemed no more than a continuation of the pious sentiment that had gone before. He stumped sturdily down the lane, David keeping at his side, and presently they came to the barn-yard—an acre of bare, trampled earth, strewn with a clean litter of straw and fodder. In the middle of the yard stood one of those vast red barns that dot the grain-growing West, its doors yawning wide upon a cool, sweet-scented interior. Around it were many sheds, bins, and cribs, as though the mother-structure had given birth to a numerous brood of young. Within was fat abundance; racks, mow, and bins bulged to the point of bursting overflow. As David drove in his team, a dozen six-weeks pigs, black and plump as crickets, that were feeding upon the spilled grain, scuttled away in a squealing chorus of alarm. Every nook in the great building was alive with poultry, gorged to repletion, yet loath to leave off picking at the luscious tidbits.

David stripped off the harness and cared for the horses, filling the feed-boxes with lavish hand; then stood for a little time, looking upon the familiar scene, listening to the confusion of familiar sounds—the chuttering of the plethoric hens, the crunching of the horses' jaws, the comfortable swish of their tails, and the saucy twittering of myriad sparrows in the rafters overhead. It was all commonplace enough, but he felt a sudden and

strong accession of fondness for its every particular.

In the yard was the same aspect of plenty and content. Close against the barn a bevy of hens lay prone, nestled into hollows they had fashioned in the warm dust. Pigeons were everywhere, clean, trim, full-breasted, golden-eyed—aristocrats of the air come down to levy contribution. Around the windmill tanks, in one corner of the fence, was a broad puddle made by overflow; and there were pigs and ducks taking their ease in the black mud. The cows were gathered around the feed-racks near by, pulling at their fodder and yielding their full udders to the hand of Uncle Billy.

David moved to the old man's side. "Aren't you going to let me help you milk, Uncle Billy?" he asked.

The old fellow turned a leering face. "Time you come back again you won't want to 'sociate with anything so common as a milch-cow, unless they got silk fringe to their ears an' gilt tassels to their tails. Git out! You don't know how to milk, nohow. You run along an' git you slicked up for the party. When I was your age, it used to take me two-three hours to git me fixed out in my things, when I knowed my girl was goin' to look at me."

The allusion brought a quick flush to David's face; but he was not abashed. "Have you seen my girl to-day, Uncle Billy?" he asked.

The old man clucked his tongue, waggishly. "By 'Mighty! You'll need to put on all the fixin's you got in your bureau, if you're goin' to play with *her*. *Seen* her! Have I *seen* her? Well, I *guess* so! Seen her buggy-ridin' with a feller. She cert'nly was havin' a good time, too. I could hear her laughin' a quarter of a mile off. She cert'nly has got a good, hearty laugh, Maggie has."

"Maggie!" David scoffed, with his light laugh. "I wasn't asking about Maggie Ritter."

"Oh-h!" Uncle Billy chuckled. "I thought she was the one. She used to be, the last time I took notice."

"You haven't been noticing for quite a while, then."

"'Mighty! 'Ain't I got enough to do, without havin' to keep track o' your changes o' heart about the girls? 'Twould take all a man's time to do that. Git along with you, now. These cattle don't like to have children around 'em milkin'-time. Makes 'em skittish."

David swung towards the gate that opened from the barn-yard into the garden-plot. As his hand lay upon the latch, a cracked voice called after him:

"Dave! Oh, Dave!" Uncle Billy was leaning sidewise on his stool, squinting around the tail of his cow. "Say, if you was to happen to see that girl they call Ruth—you know: that fat girl, with the apple-face—you tell her Uncle Billy's all right, will you?"

David's shoulders were straightened and his eyes eager.

"I don't know any fat girl with an apple-face," he said. "Is she here?" But the old man had gone into eclipse behind his cow.

II

THERE was a new zest in the boy's thoughts, a new light in his eyes, a new spring in his step, as he hurried down the path towards the house. The garden had yielded its fruits long ago, and was lying in a fallow tangle of wild growths, which spread into every corner and cranny. A thick strand of bindweed, reaching out across the path, caught at his feet; a luxuriant mass of foxtail held him for a moment by the knees. The checks made him curiously impatient, as though he had been buttonholed for a tedious argument.

But when he reached the broad landing before the door of the kitchen he hung back a little, pulling his neckerchief into a tidier knot and brushing his hand over his tumbled hair. Then he moved to the open doorway, leaning against the frame and looking eagerly within.

The kitchen was a wide, low-ceiled room, wholly given over to utility. There was little attempt at adornment; every article of furniture was of the plainest; it might have suggested emotional poverty but for the unmistakable air of comfortable plenty that pervaded it. The big

cooking-range was alive with a roaring wood fire, and self-importantly excited, its top covered thick with steaming kettles and pots, while on the hearth and pipe-shelf were many pans filled with mysteries wrought in dough, ready for the oven. The room seemed to swarm with delicious odors that vied with one another for supremacy.

A woman stood leaning over the work-table, her back towards the door. In every contour of her figure jollity was written large. She had a jolly, round breadth of hip and waist and shoulder, a jolly, full outline of cheek and neck. Her arms were bared, disclosing a wealth of jolly dimples about the plump elbows. Her hair, streaked somewhat with gray, had been gathered into a tight knot at the back of her head; but from the mass some unruly strands had escaped, making a row of jolly little curls from nape to temples, that bobbed about in a jolly flutter as she bent briskly to her work. A heart toughened by constitutional misanthropy must have felt a thrill of warmth in that presence. David regarded her for a time in smiling silence.

"Well, mother," he said at last, "seems to me you're busy."

She turned quickly, showing a face quite in keeping with the aspect of her figure. It was the face of an elderly woman, to be sure, lined somewhat by years, and with the flesh drooping a little about cheeks and chin; yet there was in it a fair pledge of that youth which does not succumb

to time alone. Time had done no more than to ease the rigor of early tension. Her lips were as full and red as those of a girl; a flush of rosy color tinged her clear skin; her gray eyes shone with lambent lights. At sight of David she smiled brightly, and her voice in greeting was resonant and full.

"Is that you, son? I didn't hear you come up. You aren't through already, are you?"

"That's what I am," he answered, with satisfaction. "The hill eighty is ready for the harrow. Oh, I can hustle when I've a mind to."

While he talked he was looking furtively around the kitchen. His glance came to rest as it found what it sought — a small, jaunty hat of gray straw, with a gray ribbon and a scarlet flower, flung down carelessly upon the window-shelf. He would have relished a glimpse of the face that pertained to the hat; but that would come in good time. The suspense was not unendurable— only a whetting of desire. The main point was settled to his liking: she was somewhere near by.

"Are you hungry?" his mother asked. "I suppose that isn't a sensible question, though. Of course you are. You'd better get you a little bite, if you think you can't wait till supper. There's fresh rusk on the pantry shelf, and a dish of apple-butter; and there's a pot of coffee on the back of the stove. That 'll be enough to take the edge off your appetite, till company comes."

He set out his simple meal upon a corner of the

table, and ate with hearty relish, talking between whiles of the little matters of home interest.

"Wheat's bound to do well, next year," he said. "The ground never was in better shape. The crop ought to run ahead of any we've had since I've been in the fields."

"Yes?" she queried, contentedly. "Well, that's good. A good wheat crop is what makes the world go round. I've thought of that, many a time, when I've been cooking. We'd have a slim supper to-night if it wasn't for wheat. It's a blessed thing the Lord sees fit to give us what we couldn't get along without."

"We'd sure be in a bad fix if He didn't," David laughed.

"Why, yes. And yet we take it all the time, year after year, just as if it wasn't anything of a miracle. Dear knows, we don't deserve it."

"Oh yes, we do," David said, with easy confidence. "If we do the work that makes a crop, we deserve it. Sure! We deserve every grain we get—more, too, counting in the drought years. If you count the droughts, that we aren't to blame for, doesn't that leave Providence in debt to us?"

If there was heresy in the argument, his mother gave it no heed; she was concerned just then with the weightier matter of taking from the oven a big panful of custard-puffs. She set one upon David's plate, and, as he dipped his spoon into its smooth, golden heart, he, too, forgot the point at issue.

"That's good!" he sighed, when the last flaky crumb was gone. "I guess I'll be able to hold out a while now. I think I'll go up and dress. Don't worry about anything else, mother, so you'll be all tired out. You've surely got enough cooked. Can't you quit for a while now?"

"Yes, I'm going to, just as soon as this ham's ready to take off the stove, so I can set it by to cool. I'll slice it after while. That's all there is left to do, except these cookies and another pan of puffs. Don't you fret about me. I'm not a mite tired."

He stood for a moment in indecision; then he asked, abruptly:

"Where's Ruth?"

His mother righted her posture, setting her floury hands upon her hips and regarding him with twinkling eyes.

"Ruth!" she echoed. "Ruth! Well, I'll be blessed!" She broke into a broad, rolling laugh, very rich and pleasant to hear. "'Where's Ruth?'" she bantered. "Where should she be, do you think, but up-stairs in front of the looking-glass. She got through helping me an hour ago, and I sent her away to dress. You won't see Ruth, let me tell you, till the time comes; so it's no use for you to be hanging around here."

III

BEFORE the shadows of the cotton-woods, creeping hungrily forward, had licked up the last of the sunshine that lay upon the broad lawn, the household had put the final touches to its "company" appearance, and was awaiting the first of its guests. In the simple-hearted friendliness of a country neighborhood, one hour is almost as good as another for even the most exacting of ceremonies. Half-past seven found the house filled with a score of young people.

It was a democratic gathering. The sons and daughters of wealthy farmers met on a perfect equality of rank and understanding with field-hands and dairy-maids. No one was embarrassed, because no one stopped to think of artificial gradations; social worth was fixed by the one easy condition of youth, and that primitive, spontaneous honesty of thought and motive which pertains to the life of the farm. For the most part these boys and girls had grown up together from their first years of innocence; and in growing up they had not grown apart, but into a closer and closer intimacy. In heart and soul they were still mostly children; for them life was still but a lim-

pid deep, shot through and through with golden light. Their minds were placid, sweet-tempered, wrought to no high, grim tension by struggles for place and preferment; on every face were tokens of a tranquil freshness of spirit—a clear depth in the eyes, a ruddy tone in the cheeks—not wholly due to the mere physical effect of sun and air.

Despite their every-day relationship, there was upon them now an air of bashful diffidence. The first shyness of meeting at a "party" had not yet worn away. The girls were gathered by themselves in two or three knots, on the stairs and in the hallway, giggling, whispering, daring one another to make the first overture to the boys. They were a buxom lot, fresh-colored, full-bosomed, running over with animal vitality and with a frank, inoffensive vanity—the sort that are called "good" girls; at once satisfying and disappointing—capable of much, yet contenting themselves with doing very little; intensely human, and therefore intensely lovable.

The young men were in the same mood of wistful reluctance, sitting in a stiff row around the walls of the parlor, perspiring, uncomfortable, voiceless, their necks clasped in unaccustomed bands of starched linen, their deeply tanned cheeks making a strong contrast with the clear white of their foreheads. Theirs was only the awkwardness of being out of place, with nothing to fix attention upon. Idleness of the muscles meant a relaxing of the mind, a drooping of the

plumes of purpose. Their eyes were restless; their hard, red hands hung open between their knees. Seen thus, they were like roughly sketched studies of men, containing all a man's vital parts, but with the outlines imperfectly filled in.

David came in from the barn, where he had been playing a hostly part. It was in the barnyard that he had received most of his guests. He stood for a moment in the hall, looking about, his eyes dancing with appreciation of what he saw.

"Come, come!" he laughed. "This won't do. Can't you make it go, girls? What's the trouble?"

"It ain't our fault," one of the girls declared. "If they'd rather sit in there and crack their knuckles than come out here and be sociable, we don't care."

"I think they're afraid," another asserted from the shadows of the stairway.

"Who said that?" David questioned. "Was that Bess Woodruff? Where's Dan? Where's that brother of mine? Isn't he somewhere about? Oh, Dan! Bess says you're a coward."

"Why, David Boughton!" she protested. "I never said any such thing. You story! I think you're just horrid!"

"That yearlin'!" a deep voice answered from the parlor. "If she'll come where I am, I'll show her."

"Oh, you come out here!" the girl called, gayly. "You don't dast, for all you're so brave."

A sturdy figure stepped into the hall. "Where

is she?" the voice menaced. "Just let me get hold of her!" With a stifled shriek, half dismay and half eager anticipation, the girl fled up-stairs, the man at her heels, the company following in a clamorous chorus. The farther end of the hall was in darkness, and thither the chase tended, ending in a scream and a scuffle.

"I've got her!" Dan cried. "Now, you little minx, do you know what I'm going to do to you? A coward, am I? Bring a light, Dave, so everybody can see. Hold it up high. Now, Miss Bess Woodruff, you're going to be kissed, right before all these folks."

"Dan Boughton!" she shrilled. "Don't you dare! Let go of my hands! If you don't let go, I'll slap you!"

"Oh, you will?" he taunted, bringing his face close to hers. "It's no use fighting, my lady; you might just as well stop it, and pucker up your mouth."

Struggling, she slipped to the floor; but he raised her to her feet, pinioning her arms. She ducked her head against his breast; but he passed one powerful arm about her, holding her helpless, while with his free hand he turned her face to the light, stooped with deliberation and laid a sounding kiss upon her lips; then released her, breathless, crimsoned, dishevelled, her eyes glowing, assuming an air of mortal offence—a pretty bit of affectation that deceived nobody. There was a noisy outbreak of shouts and laughter.

"My!" David cried. "Isn't there some girl that wants to call me a coward?" The ice was broken then, and the evening's pleasure auspiciously begun.

Still David was not quite content. Among the bevy of rosy beauties he looked for one face—the face for which his eyes had been hungering since he came from the field. Ruth was not there, and in her absence he was oppressed by a sense of loss and denial. Watching his chance, he slipped quietly out to the kitchen; and as he pushed open the door his thoughts were brought speedily back into tune.

With his mother, busy over the details of the supper, was a girl clad in a gown of some soft, pale-blue stuff, the loose sleeves pushed back, a snowy apron hanging from her neck to the floor. But, though its drapery was so ample, it could not hide the lines of her splendid young figure — the wealth of her breast, the rich abundance of her arms and shoulders, the long, sweeping curves of waist and hips. She was tall, almost as tall as he, yet with an exquisite symmetry and grace that amounted to airy lightness. Upon her well-poised head was coiled a mass of brown hair, that shimmered in the lamplight with a golden lustre, and caught in the coils was a bunch of late violets.

"Ruth! Why, Ruth!" David cried. She stood erect above her work, revealing a face beautifully formed on a fine, free model—a face whose perfection was not in classic lines or delicate sculptur-

ing of features, but in the spiritual sweetness that shone through, making mere form seem wholly secondary. It was a face of the type that belongs peculiarly to the American girl of composite lineage; its every feature was eloquent of the survival of the fittest things in womanly charm gathered from many sources. The artist has been at great pains to establish his little dicta prescribing an abstract perfection of outline and coloring, but now and then a living face will confront him, brilliant, radiant, setting his rules at defiance, and sending his complaisance into a tottering decline. Such a face was Ruth Milford's, from the tip of the round, firm chin to the first wave of hair over the low, white forehead. She looked at David with wide, gray eyes—eyes that were strangers to any trick of art or artifice —and her smile of greeting was full of the same lovable assurance of innocence. Hers was a wholesome, sane, serene presence, the presence of one who had never encountered doubt or dismay or weakness—one who had travelled none but the fair, green paths that lead to the attainment of simple and pure desires.

"Well, I think it's time you're remembering your manners," she said. Her voice was soft, yet vibrant and vital. "I've been here since two o'clock, and you haven't taken any more notice of me than if I were on the shady side of the moon. And I've been slaving and slaving over your old supper till my head's whirling with it.

'Who made you?' The cook. 'Of what are you made?' Victuals and drink. 'What's the chief end of man?' Fried chicken and ham sandwiches and doughnuts and pineapple sherbet and pie and sweet cider—"

Mrs. Boughton broke in with her jolly laugh. "All that's enough to be the end of any man, in or out of the Catechism. Has everybody come, David?"

But he did not hear. He was looking at Ruth. He stepped to her side, where she bent over a huge platter filled with brown bits of chicken, and his hand covertly sought hers, closing firmly upon it.

"David!" she expostulated. "Let go. I want to put that necktie straight for you. You're a very untidy person. Come over here to the light. Now, hold your chin up. *Up*, I said. *That's* up, towards the ceiling."

"But it strains my eyes to look at you that way," he objected, "and I'd rather wear my necktie crooked all the rest of my days than miss one good, square look at you." And his chin persisted in rebellion against her authority, so that her task took a long time.

"There, that will do now," she said, when the bow was tied to her liking. "Don't you know this is my busy day? You run along to your play. It sounds as if they needed some one to look after them in there."

A gale of laughter and noisy applause swept from the front of the house. David reluctantly

left the kitchen and returned to his post, where he found his guests deep in a game of "clap in and clap out." Other amusements of that hardy old school followed, and then succeeded a round of conundrums loaded with light charges of archaic humor—a gauzy amusement, but doing ample service in a company that was bound to be merry.

Uncle Billy came in from his last chores while this sport was at its height. He was in stocking feet, carrying his shoes in his hand. At the foot of the stairway he paused for a little time, listening.

"Lord!" he interjected, presently. "Some o' them jokes was nigh dead of old age when I had my first breeches on. Why don't you let 'em have their rest? It's too much like grave-robbin' to be diggin' 'em up. Git some new ones, why can't you? I'll tell you one, bran'-new. I made it myself yeste'day mornin' at breakfast. It's a good one, too. Now you boys keep still while I ask it, an' don't tell 'em what the answer is. This is it: If a piece of boiled wienerwurst—what they give you with cabbage down to the hotel at Waterloo—if one o' them wienerwursts could talk, what 'd be the first thing it 'd say? You ain't never goin' to guess that one. Don't you tell 'em the gag, boys; that wouldn't be fair."

A hush fell upon the company. Uncle Billy limped slowly up the stairs, holding to the balustrade, grinning over his shoulder. "Better

give it up," he challenged. "The' ain't brains enough in the whole crowd to guess it. This is what it 'd say: It 'd say, 'Bow-wow!'"

He had his reward. An applauding outcry went up from the general throat, and he collapsed upon the landing exulting over his easy victory. When he sought to rise the effort was ineffectual.

"You'll have to come an' gim me a lift, Dave," he called; and, leaning his weight upon the strong, young arm, he gained the upper hallway and went to his room.

"I'll help you off with your clothes, Uncle Billy," David volunteered. "You must be pretty well tired out with the extra work to-night. But I wish you'd felt like staying up a while, till supper's ready."

"Nope," the old fellow returned. "Bed's a pretty good place after sundown. I had some supper, though. That girl Ruth looked after me in the kitchen." He sat in silence for a moment on the edge of his bed, his eyes ruminant. "I don't blame you a mite, Dave, for settin' a heap by her. She's as fine as they make 'em; they don't git none finer nowhere. Think o' her goin' down on her knees on the kitchen floor in her party dress an' takin' off a crippled old hired man's shoes for him! That's what she done. She's a lady; that's what she is. Now, you go along, boy. I'll take care o' myself the rest, if you'll just blow out the light for me. Good-night. Enjoy yourself."

Then came the supper—a riot of good feeling. The dining-room—wide, cheery, hospitable—was massed with foliage and flowers from garden, woodland, and meadow. A dozen paper lanterns swung on strings from the low ceiling, and beneath was the table, bowed under a surfeit of all that country cookery could accomplish. The hale appetites of the young folks set willingly to the hopeless task of disposing of the good things, eating until stayed by complete satiety.

After the supper the company gathered once again in hall and parlor, and made a pretence of resuming the earlier gayety; but the springy alertness of mind and limb was abated for a time, giving place to drowsy content. Speech went on somewhat, but only fitfully, with long intervals of silence. The night was of summery warmth, and the doors and windows stood open, admitting the sweet air. A belated whippoorwill called insistently from the grove by the river; a little brown owl hooted in the boughs of a door-yard elm; myriad insects hummed and chirped in the matted blue-grass under the nearer trees. David sat by a window, listening, his thoughts suffused with tender satisfaction. He would soon say good-bye to all this, and he was suddenly realizing how clean and gracious his life at home had been.

By-and-by one of the girls disturbed the quiet with a cry:

"Why, there's Mr. Keller! Why didn't you

come sooner? You've missed all the good things to eat."

The new-comer had approached quietly and stood leaning against a porch column, where the glow of the lamps threw his figure into relief against the black background of the night. In face and form he offered a striking contrast to the dominant type in the company. He was above middle height, but slender; sinewy rather than muscular. A thick, curling, brown beard covered his cheeks and chin, giving him an air of vigorous maturity, though he was hardly past the age of thirty-five. His eyes, brown and clear, held an odd, whimsical expression, as though he was accustomed to looking on at life from outside the procession and got much quiet enjoyment out of the spectacle. His dress, too, set him apart; it was modest yet modish, and was worn with an air of distinction that hardly pertained to the life of that simple neighborhood.

David stepped out quickly to greet him, grasping his hand heartily.

"Is it really you, Joe? I'm mighty glad you've come. I was afraid you'd forgotten, or made up your mind it wouldn't be worth while. Come in. Don't let these folks discourage you; I'll get you some supper."

The other held his response in abeyance for a little while, holding David's hand in his with a detaining pressure, his glance lingering upon the happy young face.

"No," he said, "I think I'll not go in. I'm smoking, and, besides, I have only a few minutes to stay. I don't care for anything to eat. Can't you come outside with me? I must get back to my work pretty soon, but I want to talk to you a bit. I sha'n't keep you long away from your guests."

David called to those in the house: "Go on with your fun; I'll be back again right away." Then with his friend he descended the steps, and they walked through the shadows to the roadway beyond. There Keller leaped lightly to a seat upon one of the flat-topped gate-posts, while David stood near by, resting his arms upon the fence, waiting for the tide of speech to flow.

IV

ALTHOUGH Keller had said that time was pressing, he seemed in no hurry to speak. He knocked the dottle from his pipe, filled it afresh, and sat for a time calmly smoking. When words came by-and-by they were directed to no practical point.

"If it weren't for night-time we'd all go into spiritual bankruptcy. A look at a sky full of stars is the best of all ways for renewing the soul's youth."

David's native tendency to laugh asserted itself, but the laugh died quickly away. "Yes, Joe, I know. No wonder you poets like the night-time; it's good raw material for the best kind of poetry; all you have to do is to write it. Sometimes, on nights like this, I've felt fit to make some of the finest stuff that ever was sent through the mails, but then, when I sit down beside a lamp and try to do it, it's no go. I reckon that's most of the difference between a real genius and the rest of folks—the genius can stand the test of kerosene."

Keller suffered the remark to pass. He had mental occupation enough in puffing comfortably

at his pipe and in following the lazy smoke-clouds as they drifted away upon the slow air.

"I remember one summer night, six years ago," he said, presently, "when I came to tell you good-bye before you went to the university. I sat on this very post then, and we had a long talk about things. You haven't forgotten?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," David answered, slowly, his memory busy. An interval of meditation followed upon that. They had long since got out of the way of hurrying each other in these times of intercourse. When a word was ready it would come; and they understood and knew how to use the silences. Often their talk would have appeared to an outsider as piecemeal, without sequence or order, but for them it was held together by what they were able to take for granted.

"So you're going to try the law," Keller remarked, finally. "Well, you know I wish you well, David; but I can't say I congratulate you. It's pleasant to think of seeing something of the other side of life, but this is the best side. I know what will happen to you: you'll lose a lot of happy illusions."

"But I'm not a child any longer to be amused with illusions," David suggested. "I'm twenty-six years old. I think I'm entitled to call myself a man. If they are illusions, isn't it better that I should give them up?"

"That would be good argument," Keller agreed,

"if you were sure of getting hold of realities in their stead. But what you'll get will be only another lot of illusions, less lovely than these. It seems to me that you're risking a great deal more than you can afford to lose."

There was another silence. "Joe," David said, abruptly, "I've wondered a hundred times what it is that keeps you here. It isn't necessity; you've never known the meaning of that word as the rest of us know it — money-necessity, I mean. You've got money to feed to the birds."

"More than they could possibly eat with comfort," Keller assented. "It's indigestible stuff."

"Yes. And you have a name as a poet—a name that people are passing around the dinner-tables back East. I should think you'd want to be where they're interested in you. Who knows anything about your work here? They know you write poetry, and they feel sorry for you; that's about the amount of it. I've been expecting for years that you'd go where you can be tasting your fame."

Keller waited in his turn, drumming with his heels upon the post, and whistling softly. "No," he said, "I don't care what folks say about me; I don't want to hear it. It's the work only that I want. I'm one of the blessed, Dave, because I've found my place and my work. Nothing could tempt me away from here."

David stood erect, gathering himself for argu-

ment. "Then it's just because you're contented that you stay here?"

"Just because I'm wholly, absolutely, perfectly contented. Don't you think that's a pretty good reason?"

"No," David answered, stoutly. "If it is, then I'm all wrong, for that's exactly the reason why I'm going away. I'm afraid to stay. I don't want to be contented with this."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it isn't because I'm above it, or anything of that sort. I'm not such a fool as to think I'm too good for farming. But I want to try myself. I want a bigger, freer field for a while, so that I can find out what my man's strength is. You know what I mean."

"Oh yes; I know what you mean. And what *I* mean is that this is field enough for any man who isn't insane with the silly forms of ambition, such as you've been expecting me to show—ambition to make a stir in the world and to hear folks screaming about it. You'll never find a better place than this for showing your man's strength, if that's really all you want."

"It's a dead level, this life here," David contended.

"Yes, it's a dead level of peace and goodness and health and all the conditions that go to make up human happiness. What do you expect to get that will better it?"

"Don't misunderstand me, Joe. I'm not dis-

satisfied with what this life gives me. The trouble is that it gives me too much. I'd like to do more to earn what I get. I can plough and plant and reap, and do it all honestly, but, after all, the harvest is really none of my making. It's clear outside of me, almost like an outright gratuity. I want to take hold of something with my own powers and beat it into shape without any help at all, so that by-and-by I can enjoy one supreme and ultimate moment of personal victory. Don't you see? Can't you understand what that feeling is?"

"Ah!" Keller responded, gently. "Are you really in earnest? An ultimate moment!" In the pause that ensued David felt that the words were in some sort an accusation against his intellectual integrity. "That's an old, old idea, my friend, and not a very healthy one. It's ruined more men than it's saved, a thousand times over. Look here!" He blew a strong breath through his pipe-stem, sending a fountain of red sparks into the darkness. "That was the ultimate moment for every one of those."

There was a lack of assurance in David's unfailing answering laugh, as though, rather against his will, he caught the force of the suggestion. Keller emptied his pipe again and put it away in his pocket, then dropped to the ground, coming close and laying his hand upon David's shoulder. "Don't let me influence you too much. A man must follow his own convictions, and I want you

to follow yours. I'm simply following mine when I say that there is no ultimate moment for any of us except the present. We must find our joys in our work and not in the thought of a far-off reward. It's so easy to miss the good of to-day by waiting for that time by-and-by that's to witness our resurrection and crowning. Any day may be the resurrection-day, if we choose. You mustn't bank too much in the future, for the future's an ugly, dark, damp hole, full of moths and rust."

"But, Joe, suppose everybody lived according to that; what sort of a world would this be?"

"I wonder!" Keller returned, calmly. "Would it be so much worse than it is, do you think?"

David went about on another tack. "Don't misjudge me, old man. God knows I love this life and all that's in it. But I've been listening to-night to the talk among those folks in the house. There isn't one large interest among them all—nothing but a stolid complacency. They haven't an idea above wondering what old man Boynton will plant on his bottom-land next year, and how many hogs Clark lost from the cholera. Heavens, Joe, that isn't a big life! What's the use of arguing about it. It's not much short of inane."

"Yes," Keller conceded, "the life is primitive enough in its mental attitudes. No one would think of consulting these people on any of the great world-theories. They aren't trying to con-

found the world with any subtle 'views,' or such like. They mostly talk nothing but palpable nonsense; but they *act* sense. Don't lose sight of that. The gift of wise speech is very rare, and I'll admit you won't find it here in the Elkhorn valley. I've often been struck by it, that their talk is a good deal like picking with one unskilful finger on a single unmusical string. But in action they sweep the whole gamut of harmony. They can't explain their motives, I know; perhaps it never occurs to them to think about such things as motives. That's really their salvation. A man's in a bad way when he stops to puzzle over his work, trying to make out what it's all about." He interrupted his own earnestness with a short laugh. "Oh, I know the talk. These folks are simple and rude and unlovely to look at; they don't know the first principles of politeness; they don't fulfil the most elementary requirements of art. Art! That's the word that's responsible for most of our idiocy. It's been made to appear that we ought to consider the ulterior aims of life, strike philosophic attitudes, and struggle for artistic effects. Fudge! When I was travelling, I used to hear that sort of nonsense till it turned my stomach. It was paradise to come back here and mix again with men who were throwing heart and soul into the pure joy of living, never dreaming of attitudes or effects."

"Come, now," David broke in, impatiently. "Would you have every man stay with his

plough, just because he happens to be born on a farm?"

"I'd have him think well before he quits it for something else," Keller answered, promptly. "I know what's on your mind. You want to be somebody. All right; go ahead and try it, and God bless you. No, I don't ask you to stay at your plough. But I do say this: A sweaty, earth-stained man straining at his plough is a finer and better figure than a posed Apollo, because he's doing something. Suppose that in the interests of art he drops his plough-handles and tries to strike a pose; that doesn't make him an Apollo; it only makes him ridiculous."

"Joe, suppose Lincoln had stayed at his rail-splitting? Suppose Jesus had stayed at his carpenter's bench?"

"Oh, that's another question entirely," Keller returned, imperturbably. "If a man is intrusted with a message, he must go and deliver it, of course. If that's what's moving you, I'm sorry I spoke as I did."

David met this speech honestly. "No, I'm afraid I haven't any message in particular."

Keller swung the gate open and went out, then turned and offered both his hands.

"Well, good-bye, and good luck! You're as fine a fellow as I know. I'll be as glad as yourself if the thing turns out well with you. You mustn't take what I've said too much to heart. When it comes to a question of destiny, every man must

work it out for himself; all this pother of debate doesn't affect it a bit, one way or the other. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Joe," David said, with real feeling; and without more ado Keller strode away down the road.

V

WHEN he was in the house again David's mind promptly shed its seriousness. The cause was not far to seek. The work in the kitchen and dining-room had been finished, and Ruth stood beneath the swinging lamp in the hall taking her share in the fun that was now revived and in full glow. She had put aside her apron and had given to her toilet some touches of final arrangement, as daintily effective as they were mysterious. David was instantly aware of the change. She was superbly beautiful. Just to behold her at the distance of the hall's length gave him keen delight; and this was deepened when the group about her parted, in tacit understanding, making way for him to approach. For the rest of the evening he was hardly to be coaxed from her side; and when the party broke up, near midnight, and he listened to the frank, friendly, awkward words of farewell, the occasion for such speech seemed to him quite unreal and far away. His every other thought had been lost in the simple ecstasy of Ruth's presence and companionship.

When his guests had driven away, after the last word of parting, he took his place at her side and

walked with her down the pathway towards the road. As the gate closed behind them she rested her hand lightly in the hollow of his arm, but that did not fill the measure of his desire.

"Please, Ruth," he whispered, and the demure hand crept forward along his arm until his fingers could clasp hers. Then he was satisfied, until it flashed upon him that with every step, however slow, he was getting nearer the end. When they came to the entrance to the lane that made a short cut across the fields she offered to turn from the road, but he drew her back.

"Let's go the long way," he pleaded.

"Oh, David!" she said, in gentle protest. "It's half a mile farther." Nevertheless, she fell again into step with him on the "long way."

"I wish it were half-way across the State," he declared, in sudden audacity.

She laughed, a ringing peal of undisguised enjoyment. "You'd miss your train in the morning."

Then in silence they moved slowly onward. To other folk that would have appeared as only a commonplace country road, dusty and weed-grown, but to David it seemed a fair by-path in paradise. The measures of distance and time became all at once meaningless fictions; nothing was real but the instant and its joy. The wide night drew close, touching them, enfolding them. Far away some of the young people, homeward bound, were singing. The sound appeared to

have no place—to come to them out of the upper air. The slow, south wind lagged and loitered under its heavy burden of sweet, wild odors. By-and-by the moon crept above the rim of the prairie, flooding the landscape with liquid silver, turning that hour into the very climax of the year's perfection.

No other word passed between them until they stopped beneath the trees at the end of their walk. Then David came back to earth with a sigh.

"Oh, Ruth, it's been too good to last!" He took her hands in his, holding them with a firm pressure; nor did she deny them to him. A fleck of the moon's radiance sifted down through the leafage and lay quivering upon her cheek, and his heart leaped with desire.

"Dear Ruth," he whispered. "I never knew that moonlight was a thing a man might long to kiss." She did not try to escape from him; she only bent her beautiful head in silence. He put his arm about her and drew her close. "Ruth," he cried, softly, "you have never kissed me."

She did not resist; she turned her glorious face to his in the tender light, and he bent and touched her lips with his. For an instant she yielded herself to his arms; then, with an inarticulate, startled cry, she broke from his clasp and ran swiftly up the pathway towards the house; and he turned homeward, his heart singing to the night.

An eerie quiet was in the hall, where so short a

time ago rollicking mirth had ruled. A lamp had been left burning for him, but he turned it out and went to his room in the moonlight. He had no inclination for sleep; he made no preparation for bed, but sat by the open window, looking out. He heard a clock on the stair-landing strike two, then three, then four. When he arose at last and threw himself upon his bed there was a look upon the face of the eastern sky as though it was expecting the dawn.

VI

DAVID had slept but a little while when he started up, broad awake, tingling with life. A jay was scolding in the elm before his window; a cockerel flapped his wings in the yard below, crowing lustily. The new day was well begun. David stepped lightly into the hall and down the stairs, meaning to do his usual share of the morning chores before the household should be aroused; but he found his mother moving about the kitchen, busy with preparations for breakfast.

"Well, son!" she said, in composed greeting.

"Why, mother!" he returned. "I didn't think you'd be up yet. Aren't you tired after all that fuss?"

"Oh, I'm all right," she answered, easily. "You mustn't think I need any pampering yet. I wish you'd fetch me a basket of cobs and fix up the fire a bit, and I'll have your breakfast ready in five minutes."

He went out willingly upon his errand. There was a tonic chill in the morning air; it refreshed his senses; he breathed deep draughts of it into his lungs, feeling it affecting him like wine. When he had stuffed the stove with the light fuel, he

went out again to the pump in the yard and made his toilet at the spout. On his return his mother set before him on the table a steaming plate and cup.

"You won't mind eating party-scraps, will you?" she said. "There was such a lot left over. I wish to goodness there was somebody to give it to. If a tramp was to happen along this morning, I'd scare him to death giving him ice-cream for his breakfast."

David's habitual laugh rang true and large. "There's the tramp problem all settled! Kill 'em off with ice-cream for breakfast! I'll have to tell that to Joe, and let him make a poem out of it. It would be just about as sensible as some of his sociological notions."

"Joe wasn't here, was he, last night?" she questioned.

"Just for a minute—just to tell me good-bye. He was too busy to stay." He sipped slowly at his coffee, meditating upon the conference at the gate, considering its points. "I like Joe," he said, presently. "You'd have been tickled to hear the way he talked to me last night—like a Dutch uncle. He's afraid I'm going to fall down."

The mother's face showed no sign of apprehension; the mother's eyes were untroubled.

"I don't believe a son of mine will ever get a very bad fall," she said, quietly. "I'd be willing to trust my boys anywhere." She came and

stood beside him, stroking his hair with a fond, light touch. "I've never preached much to my children, as some mothers do. I haven't known how. All I've tried to do has been to let them see my ideas of right and wrong, and let them make up their minds for themselves about things. It's worked pretty well, too," she added, with a smile. "I'm proud of my boys. I shouldn't be afraid of either one of you falling out of any place you climb to."

Uncle Billy came into the kitchen just then, bearing a brimming milk-pail. He set his burden down and stood by the stove warming his knotted hands, grunting with the pain in his old joints. Mrs. Boughton poured for him a cup of coffee, and he sat at the table, emptying the cup into its saucer and drinking with hissing gulps.

"That's the stuff," he said, gratefully. "Gim me some hot coffee in the mornin', with plenty of cream and sugar, an' the rest of you can have all them fancy drinks. That's just one reason why I ain't in no hurry to die an' git to be a sperrit. I don't reckon a ghost could hold a drink o' coffee, could he? It 'd all come drizzlin' out through his pores."

"Now, Billy!" Mrs. Boughton cautioned. It was one of the pleasant fictions of the household that this childlike old man was a very demon of irreverence, requiring constant check from steadier and more pious souls. He was never so well pleased as when he had called down upon himself

a word of reproof for some outbreak of spiritual daring.

"That's what," he chuckled.

"Now, Billy!" Mrs. Boughton repeated; and he hobbled away, wagging his gray head in self-approval, leaving them to their last hour together.

"Be a good boy, David," the mother said, in parting counsel—the mother-word since motherhood began. "If anything goes wrong with you, I want you to tell me about it, first of all, so long as I'm here. That's about all I'm staying for, now, is just to help my children when they need me." She walked with him through the hall, clasping his arm between her hands, hanging to him. At the door he threw his arms about her in honest affection, kissing her again and again.

"It isn't as though I was going away to stay," he said. "I'll be home every Sunday when I can, and I'll write to you often between times. You're the best little mother a man ever had, and I'm going to do my best to make you happy."

With a wave of his hand, and a last laughing call of farewell, he was off, swinging along the prairie road with the bold step of one going to certain victory.

When he came to the mouth of the lane where he had passed with Ruth the night before, he paused and looked at his watch. If he made the best of his time he would have twenty minutes to spare. He quickened his pace and struck off

through the fields, hoping for a last glimpse of his sweetheart. As he drew near the house his eyes searched every place where she might be, but he did not see her. There was no time to waste. He laid his hand upon the gate, then hesitated, an odd shyness possessing him. He did not know what he would say to her if he met her now. It was most likely that her mother would be present, with some of the half-grown and curious-minded children. Perhaps it was better to wait. He was passing on when a voice hailed him from a corner of the cornfield adjoining the house-lot:

"Hi, Dave! Don't be in such a rush. Don't you want a hunk o' this?"

A boy sat upon the ground among the corn-stalks, a freckled and tanned youngster of ten years, lank of limb, unformed, with low, bulging forehead and clear, impudent eyes. Between his knees he held the half of a late watermelon, and beside him upon the ground was a heap of broken rind. His mouth and chin were dripping with the juice; his faded calico waist was stained with it.

"I found this over in the patch yeste'day," he said, "an' I hid it out till I could get a chance to eat it 'thout havin' to whack up with all them kids. They don't divide with *me*. I took an apple away from Ben last night in bed, an' he yelled bloody murder. If that little fyst wants any melon, let him go trail one, like I done."

"Say, old man," David interrupted; "do you know where your sister is?"

"Aw, I got four sisters," the boy returned, with a touch of scorn. "Which one of 'em? Ruth? She ain't here. She's gone down to the creamery. She said *I* had to hitch up an' take her; but Joe Keller come along in his buggy, an' she went along with him." He blew out a spattering shower of pulp and seeds, then sat up with a hopeless sigh. "Gee! I can't stuff another mouthful. I'm plum full, up to my neck. I know what I'm goin' to do: I'm goin' to rub dirt all over what's left, an' tell Ben to come out an' look. Won't he throw a fit! Nasty little beggar! He's been actin' too smart lately to suit me, just because I dropped a little live toad down the back of his neck th' other day. What's a toad, to make such a fuss about? But he laid flat down on the ground an' bellered like he was goin' to die. If he don't watch out, me an' him's goin' to have trouble one o' these days. An' that Joe Keller, too! Do you like him? I don't. I don't think he knows very much. He made me mad this mornin'. He said he'd think I'd be scairt to go out in a hard rain, for fear the rain-water 'd run down my nose an' drown me. What's it to *him* if my nose does turn up? Say, I don't like any o' Ruth's fellers, only you. If she marries any of 'em, now you bet I'll make him wonder what kind of a family he's struck. *You* can marry her, though, if you want to, an' I'll keep my han's off; you could marry every sister I got—the whole bunch of 'em—if they was big enough."

"Thanks, Dick," David answered, gayly. "I'll think about it, and maybe when I come back we can fix up some kind of a deal. Good-bye."

When he was on his way again his eyes were watchful ahead. Twice he made sure that he saw Ruth in the distance, but each time it turned out to be a stout, stolid, gingham-clad farmer's wife, driving homeward from her marketing. He felt for them a curious sense of pity, almost commiseration; they seemed so far removed from romance, from every form of youthful exaltation. Butter and eggs meant so much to them; and, above all, they appeared not to comprehend their low estate. Their fat faces and baggy shoulders expressed nothing but dull placidity. Ruth would never be like that! He longed to behold her once again, if only to dispel the unreasoning depression of spirit that followed his meeting with these old wives. But he did not see her. The creamery lay at some distance out of his way, and he was forced to go on directly to the station.

His train whistled a warning of its approach just as he had bought his ticket and seen that his trunk was ready. He was glad of that; he was in no humor for meeting his acquaintances in Waterloo; he felt that they would grate upon him, with their listless cheerfulness, their slow, level speech, their narrow range of mood and sympathy. He wanted to be alone, that he might think. In the two or three minutes that passed, while the baggage was being loaded into its car, he sat

looking out through his window upon the tree-lined, sunlit street, with its broken row of poor frame buildings. Here and there was a farmer's wagon standing before a shop, the heads of the work-weary horses drooping. Sitting along the edges of the walks were rows of dawdling loafers, unkempt, ill - clad — poor hostages to destiny. Others of their kind were gathered at the station, leaning their backs against the wall, or squatting about on the platform, watching the train with eyes that betrayed no gleam of anything so vital as interest. Nowhere in the village was there to be seen a man in active motion; the place seemed in the thrall of inertia. Yes, he was glad to leave it. Already he felt himself almost a stranger to its people and their emotionless life. He had no regret when the train got under way and the dull picture slipped slowly backward out of sight. As the train rumbled over the bridge that spanned the Elkhorn he settled back against the seat-cushion and set his thoughts upon the future.

Ah, he would live now! He would know the glory of achievement. He would know what it means to swing forward out of the waiting reserve and into the battle-line, where the strongest and bravest are massed thick—struggling, torn, spent, blind with dust and blood and passion, losing themselves in the great might of accomplishment, yet somehow held steadfast through it all, while their straining eyes were set upon that

ancient landmark of man's desire—thought of victory. Victory! The very word warmed his heart, brought his soul to a white glow. His vision was none the less real to him because it had as yet no clearer form than a summer breeze. He would give it form, once he had bent his strength to it. He felt his strength to be illimitable. He had thought of that often. He had heard the word failure whispered sometimes by worn and tired folk, half under their breath; but it had meant nothing more to him than a sort of shameless blasphemy against the god that dwells in the will of a man, inspiring and guiding him. He could not understand why any man should fail of whatsoever attainment he might set his heart upon; he could not believe that worthy ambition, which would lead a man to dare the vast accidents of life, could turn out at last an evil lure, a grim, ironical illusion. Death was to him a familiar fact, and not unreasonable; but failure—no, he could not understand that. He meant to win. Surely that was not a vain dream, while he was held to his work by the ideals of youth and by thought of Ruth — Ruth and the golden splendor of love.

Throughout his life he had known nothing of real care or perplexity; even his responsibilities had been light, almost intangible, shared as they were by nature's beneficent genii. Each springtime had come to him as a prophecy of good things; each harvest season had followed as a

logical, an inevitable fulfilment of the pledge. The vast labor of conquering the wilderness of the prairie, in which his father had been a pioneer, had been well over before his birth; from his earliest youth there had been a comfortable tranquillity, undisturbed by oppressing want. If his desires had been merely plain and wholesome, they had never been balked or thwarted. It was but natural that he should have come to look upon life as a thing of order—a magnificent cosmos whose affairs moved duly forward in divinely appointed orbits. Under such conditions he could not, if he would, have avoided a sublime confidence in himself and his strength and in the great scheme of things.

He was so lost in the mazes of his thoughts that he gave no heed to what was passing around him until the train slowed down at the outer limits of the Omaha yards; and soon it pulled up at the station, panting from its long run, puffing out great clouds of misty breath.

VII

DAVID went out directly through the station to the street and set off up-town on foot. He preferred that way; he was eager for his first contact with the crowds, of which he was now to be a part. He wanted to refresh himself with the odor of the asphalt and with the look on the faces of the people. As he turned into Farnam Street and bent his steps towards the towering building on the hill where he was to begin his work, every sound of the busy thoroughfare—the hum of the motor cars, the clatter of horses' hoofs on the pavements, the scuffle of hurrying feet on the walks, the strident calling of newsboys and fruit-peddlers—the whole inarticulate clamor of the town's throng was to his ears an enthralling harmony. It was the overture before the rise of the curtain.

He entered the rotunda of the great building and stepped into a waiting elevator cage.

"I want to go to Mr. Paul Watson's office," he said to the uniformed conductor. "Eighth floor, isn't it?"

The door clanged shut and he was whirled up the dark shaft; then stepped out upon the tiled

floor of the corridor, where he found the door he sought and pushed it open.

The room was large, facing the south, with a wide outlook over the city. To his unaccustomed eyes its elegant furnishings savored more of leisure and luxury than of strenuous activity. A rich rug lay in the centre of the floor, and upon it stood a long library table, its top strewn with newspapers, magazines, and some volumes of the newest fiction. Beside the table were deep, alluring easy-chairs. By the windows were growing palms in jardinières. The only symbol of industry in the room was a girl who sat before a typewriter, her deft fingers picking lightly at the keys.

She looked up from her work upon his entrance, speaking a quiet word of formal greeting.

"Is Mr. Watson in?" David asked.

"He is engaged just now," she answered. "Will you wait?"

"Thank you," he said; but he stood for a moment at her side, smiling down upon her. "My name is David Boughton," he said, in tentative introduction. "I am to read law in the office here."

"Oh yes!" He saw that she gave him a closer scrutiny then — a woman's glance, instantaneous, interested, comprehending. It was approving, too, though he had not enough of vanity to let him see that. "Mr. Watson will be at liberty soon, I think," she said. "Will you please be seated?"

She turned again to her work, brisk, energetic, and he stood by one of the windows, looking out. The street, a hundred feet below, seemed very remote; the hurrying figures of men and women were mere crawling midgets. He felt curiously estranged from them, in their unnatural, foreshortened aspect, as though they were creatures of another sphere. But across the way, on a level with his eyes, was the court-house—a big, square-shouldered mass of gray, weather-soiled stone, standing on a hill of its own, far above the pavement, and reached by many tedious flights of stone steps—making the seat of justice a place difficult of attainment for the short-winded. It was sordid and ugly enough; but to his imagination, still fresh and boyish, it was surrounded by a nimbus of enchantment, as he stood looking at it, thinking how it was to figure in the evolution of his future.

By-and-by there came to him through the veil of his preoccupation the sound of men's voices from behind a closed door near at hand. One was thin and high-pitched; the other a huge, explosive bass. He could distinguish no words; but he amused himself with listening to the tones, trying to gauge the shifting emotions of the speakers. The contrasted accents gave a queer, jolting effect, as though the conference was moving forward over a rough road. As he listened, instinctively he took sides with the robust bass against the other. And the bass appeared to be having the

best of it; it rose suddenly in a vigorous outburst, every word a detonation. The door opened and two men came out. The one in advance was a lean, stooping fellow, mean-featured, meanly fashioned throughout. The thin voice was his, and he was using it in a parting word.

"All right, Watson; it's for you to say. He sent me, and I came; my responsibility ends when I've given you his message. You'd better think about it, though. He can make it worth your while not to be too hard on him. You'd better wait and think it over."

Watson followed close upon the other's heels. His was a gigantic figure, heavy with flesh, full of red blood, big-limbed, almost elephantine in girth of waist and shoulders, with thick neck and a massive, shaggy breadth of head. The lines of his face all tended downward, but without flaccidity. It was a stern, resolute face; one of those faces upon which a smile looks out of place and uncomfortable. He held up his hand with a gesture of dismissal.

"Boh!" he said, in an ominous rumble. "You go back to your master and tell him I said he needn't come whining to me for mercy with the blood of his own helpless victims clotted on his lips. I've got him under my foot, and I'm going to crush him. That's all. Now, you go."

When his visitor was gone, he turned to David and stood regarding him boldly, searchingly. The girl at the desk looked up from her work.

"Mr. Watson, this is Mr. Boughton," she said.

"Boughton?" Watson echoed. "Boughton? Oh yes, yes, of course!" He held out his hand and stood waiting while David crossed the width of the room to take it. It was a warm, firm hand, with a tenacious grasp. "I'm glad to see you. I didn't recognize the name at first—I suppose because I expected to see a farmer's boy—one of the raw sort. I was that kind when I left the farm. Come in." And he led the way into his private office.

Here was a greater refinement of luxury than in the outer room. Every article of furniture was of the best; the pictures and decorations alone represented a poor man's fortune. Yet the room was dominated by an air of classic simplicity—strong, individual, reflecting taste of a high order. A lawyer's library is usually a nondescript place, with no rightful claim to beauty. This was hardly beautiful, in any light, æsthetic sense of the word, yet there was an unmistakable impression of refinement in its solid, almost primitive strength. The book-cases that lined every available foot of the walls—plain, square structures of mahogany, all of one pattern—seemed an essential part of the effect. They were glutted with books, and there were overflow deposits of odd volumes everywhere—on desk, table, and window-ledges, and on the chairs and floor.

Watson closed the door and sank heavily into

the chair before his desk, motioning David into another that stood opposite.

"So, you've come," he said. "Well, I'm glad of it. I'm glad of the chance to serve a son of your mother. She's a fine woman. She was a fine girl, too. She taught the first school I ever went to, back in Ohio. I suppose she's told you?"

"Yes," David answered, simply, perfunctorily. He was heartily glad to have Watson talk, until he could get his bearings. This was his first sight of the man, and it was affecting him strangely. He could not quite make it out, but for the first time in his life he felt himself ill at ease, as though his faculties were all turned blunt on the edges in the presence of a masterful personality. It was not the man's mere bulk of figure that awed him, nor the thunderous voice, nor the ponderous manner, nor the superabundance of vital energy; it was something that looked out of the deep, sombre eyes. Hidden away in that mountainous mass of tissue was a splendid intellect, driven by an unconquerable will.

"Yes," Watson went on; "she was good to me in those days, and I haven't forgotten it. I needed just the kind of help she gave me. I was an unruly little devil. I never knew how she did it; but she inspired me with a passion for decency. Oh, I've done a power of evil in my time, of course; but I've done a few recreant scraps of good along with the bad. I'd never have done that without

her. I'd never have amounted to a hill of beans if it hadn't been for her."

He had taken a knife from the desk and was caring for his nails, trimming and biting them savagely, and speaking between times in jerky sentences. He was silent now for a little while, his features drawn tense by memory. Then all at once they relaxed, and he turned his seeing eyes to David's.

"So you want to read law, do you?" he queried. "Well, law is a good enough business if a man knows how to use it. The secret of success is in the man, though, and not in the law. The secret of success is always in the man, in everything, and in all times. For the weakling, all times are hard times; but for the strong man, the man who's *able*, any time is a good time. I've heard youngsters talk about getting 'grounded in the law,' as if that was enough to shape their career. But that isn't the groundwork. You'll have to begin further back than that. What a man wants to begin with is *sense*, then some law, and then more sense on top of that—like the bread on both sides of a sandwich. Do you see?"

"Yes," David returned, lightly, with an accession of composure. "But the law is at least the meat in the sandwich, isn't it?"

"No," Watson said, with a shake of his burly head. "No; the law of the law-books is only the mustard. You want to get rid, right away, of any superstitious reverence for these tons of

books. They're false gods; they're a hopeless tangle, and the tangle is getting worse every year. We'll have to have another revolution after a while and go back to the beginning and start fresh. It's sense, more than any amount of learning, that gives a man initiative genius. Law! Why, good Lord! A lawyer whose head isn't furnished with anything but law will starve to death. Read other things—all you can of good books—fiction, history, biography—everything. Get out and knock around with men, too. After all, when you get down to the bottom of it, it's men you'll have to handle, more than laws, if you want to come out a winner. A little sure knowledge of men is worth more than a million pages of Kent or Chitty or Wharton, or anybody else in the books. I don't mean that you want to learn how to play on men's weaknesses. That's a contemptible business. You want to know their strength. It's the sheer, downright, native strength of men that moves the world, and don't you let yourself forget it for a minute."

They sat in serious colloquy until the whistles and bells of the city raised the cry of noon. Watson looked at his watch.

"Is it twelve already? I'd no idea it was so late. And I've got a big afternoon's work, too, in federal court. Say, have you found a stopping-place? Well, I'll tell you what you do; suppose you get yourself located this afternoon, and come back here at five and go to dinner with me.

You'll do that, won't you? My daughter and I are living in a hotel. It's a poor excuse for a home; but we'll get some dinner, anyway, and talk things over a bit, and then you'll be ready to start fresh in the morning on this fool law business."

David gave but little time to his quest for a lodging-place. He took almost the first room he saw. It was a narrow apartment, bare almost to the point of poverty; but it was near the office, besides being perfectly clean and looking out upon the street. He thought it would do very well. He had never indulged any tendency towards extravagance; cleanliness was the most he desired. When that was settled he returned to the heart of the town, walking the streets and looking about.

At its best, Omaha is not a beautiful city. It is only a big, sprawling, swaggering example of what the Middle West has done along the line of crass "enterprise"—overgrown, arrogant, extravagantly boastful over matters not worth boasting about, while forgetful of most of those things in which a city should take a reasoning pride; vain of its show of wealth, without troubling itself about the means by which its wealth was gotten, nor about the use that is to be made of it; vain of its miles of streets, without stopping to reflect upon the deeper meanings of a street; vain of its hundred thousand people, without greatly caring what their character and power of service

may be. It is a town that from the day of its birth has never set for itself any worthy civic ideal; it has had almost no motive above getting on in material growth and making a dazzling show of itself; it has been content with the sordid victory that lies in outstripping its neighboring rivals in the insane struggle of amassing dollars and inhabitants. Like most Western towns, it is not to be judged by the bulk of its actual accomplishment, but rather by certain vague, half-suspected tendencies that lie in the hearts of a few—a very few—sane and sober men who have as yet taken small part in affairs—men who are nursing their thoughts in secret, waiting patiently for a day to come when the noise and bluster of foolish vanity will have spent itself. Like most Western towns, its real strength is only the strength to become.

But to David's untrained understanding power of any sort was entrancing; his untrained senses caught greedily at the flamboyant signs of energy at work, and he was satisfied. Through the hours of the afternoon he moved about the main thoroughfares, looking in at the shop-windows, pushing himself into the thickest of the crowds, listening to stray scraps of their speech, brushing his shoulders against theirs, imagining that virtue was passing into him from the contact. He was in an intoxication of enthusiasm when at the appointed time he went again to Watson's office.

Watson was sitting idly in his chair, his big hands folded behind his big head. He welcomed David with a kindly calm.

"Sit down a minute and let me catch my breath," he said. "I'm mortally tired. I've had a hard afternoon's fight. It's a railroad bond case. I've been working on it for three years in this court, and now it's going to the Court of Appeals. It 'll last ten years longer, likely. But I've made up my mind to win, and that means that I shall win in the end. The trouble is that I can't get the other fellows to see it in that light." His moody eyes warmed for a moment with an expression that in another man would have been a light of lively interest. "My hardest work is to keep up enthusiasm. I used to have plenty of it, but it seems to die out more or less as a man gets along in years. Do you remember what Stevenson says: 'It is good to have been young in youth, and then, as the years pass, to grow older.' But to grow *old;* that's where the rub comes. I'd give a great deal for an occasional day of my first years of fire to stir up my blood. The only way I can do that now is to get angry once in a while—red hot! But that's a poor substitute. That's one of the reasons why I'm going to be glad to have you with me. You haven't got past the point where the game seems worth playing. I like to watch enthusiasm, even if I don't believe much in it any more."

He arose laboriously, buttoning up his coat and reaching for his hat.

"Come on; let's go. I want you to meet my daughter before dinner."

VIII

THE hotel was a pretentious structure in point of size, but dark and depressing as a mausoleum. The vast, barnlike rotunda seemed more a fit abiding-place for bats and owls than for comfort-loving human beings. None of the guests who sat around in the stiff rows of chairs made even a pretence of cheerfulness; there was nothing to be cheerful about. Most of them looked as though they had had news of death, and the rest looked as though they might be expecting it. In that gloomy void they seemed afraid to speak aloud; speech went on in undertones, with a hollow echo against the distant roof.

Watson led the way to the parlor of a suite of rooms on an upper floor. A lad in the livery of a page was in waiting and took their hats and coats. Watson spoke to him with a brusqueness that amounted to distaste.

"Is your mistress here?"

"She is in her room, sir, dressing for dinner," the boy answered, softly.

"All right. Go tell her I'm waiting for her; and tell her I've brought a guest with me."

The lad slipped silently out of the room, and

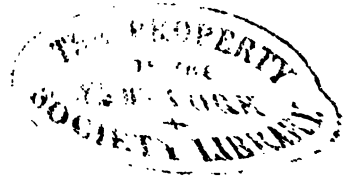
Watson let himself down into a chair, puffing out a deep breath.

"A silly notion, isn't it—that kid in buttons?" he broke out. "I don't like servants, on general principles; I've never got used to 'em. If it wasn't a physical impossibility, I'd fire my stenographer and do my work with a good, old-fashioned pen. Maybe I'm a fool, but I hate the thought of having anybody do anything for me. Even if they're paid for it, I always feel somehow as if they owned me."

The boy returned with silent, gliding step.

"Miss Margaret says she will be in directly, sir," he cooed. He stood apart from them, at a respectful distance, straight, stiff, formal. His presence appeared to check any desire Watson might have had for discourse. David spoke now and again in commonplace; but Watson gave no more than a gruff, heedless assent to what was said. The door opened presently and a lady entered.

She was near David's own age—or that, at least, was his instant impression. Her skin was dark, with a rich, soft under-glow. Her features were of that ineffable type which, in the ineffective state of our power of definition, we have agreed to call Grecian—a straight, delicate nose, pencilled brows, and low, broad forehead. Her full, curving lips were of a vivid scarlet; the oval outline of her face was perfect. There was in her presence a suggestion of stately height; yet when



David arose he found himself looking down upon her as from a towering altitude. The semblance of height may have been due to the fashion of her hair, which was abundant and gathered in a tasteful and simple mass above her head; or of her dress, which was a dinner-gown of clinging, wine-colored material, made with simple, sweeping lines. Her only ornament was a string of pearls, that lay pale against the clear dusk of her neck and bosom.

Watson got ponderously to his feet, growling in fleshy discomfort.

"Mr. Boughton, let me present you to my daughter," he said; and then to the girl: "Mr. Boughton is the man who will read law with me. We'll be likely to see a good deal of him here."

She made a slow and slight inclination of her graceful body, while David advanced with hand outstretched, in the country manner of greeting. She did not smile; her eyes were grave, serious. After an almost imperceptible instant of surprise or timidity or reluctance — it might have been any or all of these—she gave him the tips of her slender fingers. It was a very intangible hand; when he would have grasped it cordially it was gone, he knew not how. She spoke his name calmly, distinctly, then glanced with the same imperturbable gravity at her father.

"Yes," he growled. "Let's go down. I'm one of those animals that get hungry at meal-time,

Boughton. We can be getting acquainted at the table."

The little page stole forward and opened the door, closing it again noiselessly behind them. In the hall, Watson relieved himself of something very like a snort.

"Margy," he said, "I wish you'd keep that kid out of my way in the evenings. I'll step on him one of these times and break him."

There hovered about her lips for a moment a faint promise of a smile, but the promise was not fulfilled. Her manner was new and curious to David; it perturbed him; he felt that he dared not offer speech with her; so they kept silence until they were seated at a table in a secluded corner of the dining-room and Watson had given an inclusive order. Then, while they waited, it was the older man who spoke.

"I hope you can be comfortable in a hotel, Boughton. I'm not. I detest it! Put a darky in a dress suit, and stand him around some place where I can see him, and you've got me queered." For the first time since the morning's meeting he indulged a laugh—a deep, booming rumble of sound that seemed to fill the room. "I'll never forget my first hotel dinner in a city. Chicago, it was, over thirty years ago. I went to a hotel there one night with a friend, desperately hungry, and he ordered a dinner that sounded all right. I never knew how it tasted, because there was one of these swell darkies to wait on us—the first one

I'd ever seen. I was fascinated. I couldn't help looking at him, and every time I did it he came stalking up and stood at my elbow waiting for orders. I couldn't eat; he wouldn't let me; and all the time I was so famished I was ready to shed tears. And at the end there was a bottle of wine. I had to miss that, too, because I didn't dare drink it on an empty stomach. Do you know what I did? Just as soon as I decently could, I got away and went out to a cheap chop-house and climbed up on a high stool and ordered a good, honest feed of corned-beef and cabbage. I've had a grudge against niggers in frills ever since."

The first course of the dinner came on then. As the meal progressed Watson got into a glow of good-humor, and in that mood he was a rare talker. He divined what David's interests would be; he told a score of stories concerning the leaders at the bar of the State — stories that, whether grave or gay, were invested with the charm of an incisive wit. But he was not a monopolist; he adroitly induced David to talk, now and again, listening to his ingenuous, exuberant speeches with quick sympathy. Sometimes other guests, on entering or leaving the room, paused by their table for a friendly word; and with a punctilious courtesy Watson presented them to David.

"Good people, all of them," he declared once. "I've watched most of 'em come up from nothing

at all; and I've seen some of 'em fall down and then get up again more than once. They're fighters, these Western men; and I swear I do like a good, courageous fighter. It's curious, too; I suppose you haven't found it out yet for yourself, but there's nobody so just and generous and merciful as the born fighter. If these fellows have anything you want, all you've got to do is to ask for it."

The girl took no part in the conversation, save now and then a soft word or two of comment upon her father's narratives. She did not once speak to David directly. But she did not ignore him; she looked at him frequently, gravely, when he was in the full swing of an enthusiastic sentence. Her glances were never hurried, but deliberately calm and self-possessed, implying that she was attending to what he said, finding it worth attention. Her silence was not displeasing to him; he attributed it merely to maidenly shyness in the presence of a stranger, a quality that might be altogether admirable.

When the coffee came Watson leaned back in his chair, playing with his cup, fixing David with a level gaze.

"Come, now," he said, half in raillery, half in earnest, "what are you going to do, Boughton? What's your real reason for taking up law? Are you going to stop with being a lawyer?"

David waited a moment for his answer to come to him. "No," he said, slowly, thinking his way

as he went. "No; I don't expect to practise merely for the sake of practising and making a living, if that's what you mean. I've been considering the best use I could make of myself—not *for* myself alone, but for other people, too—and I've thought the law ought to be my chance. There's a lot of hard work to be done in the West, one way and another, to bring our life up to the mark. The law seems to me to be about the best instrument a young man can lay his hand to if he wants to help in working out the common salvation."

When the answer was completed he felt a pleased satisfaction in it, as though it had made clear a not unworthy attitude. Watson, too, seemed struck with it; he meditated upon it for a time quite soberly; then, with a quick gesture, he pushed back his cup and squared his arms upon the table.

"Eh?" he said, heavily. He was silent again, and his eyes, though fixed upon David, were unseeing. "M-m-m!" he breathed, huskily. "I was just trying to think how long it's been since I was nursing that notion myself. It's a good while. But I used to have it. I used to think I was going to be a sort of redeemer, and save the world—or the best part of the western hemisphere, anyway. It's a wonderfully easy rôle until you've tried it; but it gets harder then. I found it so. At fifty-seven I'm just waiting around and wondering who's going to come and save me."

It was spoken quietly; but there was in it a note that David had never heard from the lips of any man—a note of dull but passionate hopelessness. Throughout the hour the host had been fairly radiant with geniality, the whole of his big person fat with it. Now it appeared that that had been only a mask. The glow had gone out of his deep eyes; they had become as the eyes of another self—a great, sad-hearted self, that had drunk deep of bitter waters, and had learned to set a light value upon the things that were to David so priceless.

"Yes," he brooded, "I guess I'm about done with that—with all the sharp desires, and throes, and pangs, and such-like. I'm only asking now, 'Well, is there anything more expected of me?' And I don't much care whether there is or not."

David was almost aghast.

"But you don't mean," he cried, "that your work has had no good effect? Surely you don't mean that."

"I don't know whether it has or not," Watson answered, with stolid emphasis. "Who's going to say? I've found out that the effects of a man's life aren't for him to fix. The thing's too terribly intricate. A man's lucky if he can go puttering along over little things that seem real to him just at the moment, and not find time to look for effects. That's why I try to keep busy. I used to think I'd sit down by-and-by and enjoy the peace of a green old age, and all that sort of

thing, after I'd got through with my work. But I wouldn't quit now for a million dollars. I couldn't. I've got to keep at it, and just trust to luck for effects. I swear I don't see any particular effects of my own life."

"Oh!" David cried, in quick expostulation.

"Yes," said Watson; "it's perfectly true. I'm trying not to take it too hard. I hate a complainer. I'm trying to be satisfied with thinking that that was the lesson life had for me, and that I had to learn it, to have the conceit taken out of me. But it's been an ungrateful learning."

David recovered his grasp of himself. "Maybe the fault is with your own inability to see and measure results. It can't be possible that there are none. Why, if a man does his work, it's bound to have an effect; nothing can stop it. Things would go to smash if that weren't true."

"Maybe, maybe," Watson returned, wearily. The confident declaration was so awesomely immature, compared with the pain he had suffered in his deeper probings of the unfathomable theme. His interest in the question seemed suddenly abated. With a determined effort he shook himself free of his moody aspect, as a dog shakes off the water after a plunge. "There! Let's call this thing off. What shall we do to-night? Shall we take in a theatre, or stay here?"

Before the question could be answered a waiter leaned over Watson's shoulder and spoke quietly in his ear, and he got up from his place.

"Excuse me a minute," he said. "I'm wanted at the telephone. You two wait here till I come back."

When he was gone, David glanced a little timidly at the girl. She was toying with some broken nut-shells on her plate, her eyes downcast, her features in repose. He wanted to speak to her, but his mind had become a blank. Then, while he looked at her, she made an impulsive movement in her chair, turning towards him. So far as he had made up his mind about her he had thought her cold, but now her face was brilliant with warmth of feeling, her eyes glorious with a revelation of unsuspected emotional capacity. It was a disclosure that dazzled him.

"I have been interested," she said, her voice thrilling with life. "The men I've known have been all so intensely engrossed with such petty concerns. It's unusual to meet one who has taken time to dream big dreams. I wonder if you will be able to make your dreams come true. That's the real test of a man, isn't it?"

It was not a woman's speech; no other woman of his acquaintance had ever said such a thing to him. Yet it was full of a rare and subtle charm of womanliness—a charm that lay less in the saying itself than in the manner of it. Had a man said it, it would have been only a commonplace postulate, inviting argument, yet hardly worth the pains; but coming from her it was like

a confession of the soul's faith—something that must be regarded with reverence.

"Yes," he said, warmly; "that's the test. I mean to try it, too. The trial ought to make life worth while, even if I fail."

"Oh, but you mustn't fail!" she returned, with frank directness. "Why, that would make you no better than all the rest. I should like to know one man who isn't afraid of himself or his task. Do you want to know what I think? I think a man is sent here by God, and appointed to do the very best that's in him, and the deadliest sin he can commit is to be afraid. A man is just one of the pledges God makes to the world, and it depends on the man to say whether the pledge is to be kept. He can't keep it if he's afraid, because fear makes his work at the best only a cheap, shabby counterfeit."

She stopped as suddenly as she had begun. Watson came lumbering up and stood by his chair, and in his presence she became once more the embodiment of impassivity. Watson hesitated an instant, as though to be sure he was not interrupting. He had heard nothing; but what he saw brought an odd, quizzical look into his eyes.

"Shall we go up-stairs?" he suggested. "You're through, aren't you? I want to sit down on something of my own size. These rickety little chairs keep me in mortal terror."

When they were again in the parlor, and the

page had been dismissed for the night, Watson sank into his seat by the window, sighing with a fair semblance of content.

"Margy," he said, "can't we have a little music? Maybe Boughton would like it; and I know I should, if the humor's on you."

She neither assented nor demurred, but crossed to a recessed corner, drew aside a curtain and disclosed a harp.

"Will you move this for me, Mr. Boughton?" she asked; and when he had lifted it into the room she seated herself before it, sweeping the strings in a fragment of delicate, meditative improvisation; then, without a word, she played Chopin's mazurka in F minor. It was rendered with more than technical skill — with an artistic sensibility and responsiveness which made the harmonies come from herself rather than from her instrument. At the end she waited for no comment, but spoke quietly over her shoulder.

"Have you any preferences?" she asked. "Perhaps I can play something you like."

"No," he answered. "I shall like what you play. I haven't even an amateur's knowledge of music, except as life out-of-doors in the country is a sort of musical education. I love it, without knowing any of the rules for it."

"A lover is more appreciative than an analyst," she returned, her beautiful fingers weaving about her words an elaborate tracery of airy sound. "I've thought sometimes that music must have

been born out-of-doors. The gods never lived in houses, did they? Some of the best things I know are out-door music. Do you know this?" She touched the first notes of Wehli's "Rivulet." "Can't you feel it?" she cried, with a laugh through the melody. "It's the clear water about your bare feet, when you used to 'go in wadin'.' Isn't it good?" She checked the gleeful measures suddenly. "And this, too. I love this, because it's what it pretends to be." It was Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." "Yes," she said over the last notes; "I like that better. It's a lighter touch—more like air than water. And this belongs to out-doors, too, I suppose, because it's too big for walls and roofs." She played, then, Gottschalk's "Solitude." She saw his growing, eager interest, and it seemed to awaken her. As she rushed into the strange harmonies it was with an almost rapturous abandon; the music was no longer a thing of mechanism or performer, of strings or fingers, but something apart, far above the means.

"That's one of my comforts," she said at last. "'Solitude'; yet solitude needn't be dreary, nor pain hurtful, nor loss dreadful. Isn't that plain enough?" A little strand of her hair had escaped from the confining coils and lay lightly over her forehead. She caught it back into place with a quick gesture, then smiled into David's honestly admiring eyes.

"I must play you something now that my

father likes," she said, and began Leopold de Meyer's stately "Triumphal March," with its robust rhythm of the tread of victorious feet.

Watson had been sitting indifferently by; hearing, perhaps, but only from the depths of apathy. He was brought all at once to life; he listened as a man listens only to the momentous things of existence, his nerves tense, his eyes on fire.

"Ah, by God!" he cried, in his detonating voice. "When I hear that I know why music was made. It's to help us fight! If it needed to justify itself, it could do it with that one thing alone. Margy talks about the gods! People always talk as if they're creatures that dwell far off, in some place unknown to us; but it isn't so. Why, I used to know how it feels to be one, in the days before I'd met my first defeat. I forget now, though, except when something like that march jogs my memory; then I remember perfectly."

The girl struck one resonant *arpeggio* that was like a command for attention.

"But this is mine," she said to David. "It doesn't make the gods known to me, but it helps me to feel the joys of mortality, so that I cease to envy the gods. Just listen."

There followed a marvellous rendering of the *adagio* movement from Beethoven's Sonata, Opus 13, No. 8. She was as one inspired; she played with a fervor, a depth and breadth of passionate appreciation that, as he heard, seemed to lift him to her own high level of understanding. He

did not know what she played; but he knew that his thoughts were irradiated as with the glories of night and day. It was as though every worthy impulse, every lofty desire he had ever known came floating back to him upon the bosom of a limpid, sunlit sea of sound. When she had finished he was upon his feet standing at her side, meeting her upturned eyes with his.

She arose at once. "That is all," she said. "Good-night." And before he quite realized it she was gone.

Watson's heavy voice boomed rudely through the silence that followed her departure.

"You aren't going yet? Sit down. It's only half-past eight. I'm going to smoke now, if you don't mind."

He was a hardy smoker. He made for himself a thick, blue atmosphere, through which his bulk loomed dimly, like a round hill through low-lying mists. After a time he waved a rift through the smoke and looked out with a new benignity.

"Well?" he said. "What do you think of her?"

David had but one thought now; all others had been rendered obscure, wholly secondary, in comparison with the vividness of this new impression.

"She's very beautiful," he said.

"Of course!" Watson returned, heavily. "That's part of her life, to be beautiful. I don't mean that. I mean, how did she strike you? She talked to you, didn't she, when I was gone?

What do you think about her, aside from her beauty—her human side?"

David laughed in foolish embarrassment. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not entitled to speak. I don't understand women well enough."

There was a faint hint of weariness, almost of repugnance, in the glance Watson gave him. "You don't, eh? I wonder what sort of women you've known. It's the off-side of womanhood that makes men say that. Fiddle! It doesn't take any great power of penetration to understand an honest, right-hearted woman. There's never any mystery about honesty, wherever you find it. It's the dishonest ones that hide behind buttresses of mystery. I reckon a dishonest woman can keep the devil guessing."

David was not minded to wander then through the chill mazes of abstraction; his thoughts were all concrete. "Is she your only child?" he asked.

"The only one living," Watson answered. "There are two boys dead—years ago, when they were little. Yes, she's all I've got."

"I don't remember that my mother ever spoke of your wife," David pursued. "Has she been dead long?"

Watson retired again behind his veil of smoke, and answered from the safety of that fastness. "She isn't dead, so far as I know," he said, dully.

"Oh!" David cried, in quick consternation. "I beg your pardon. I didn't intend—"

"It's all right," Watson interrupted. "No

harm done. I'm not sore over it. I reckon it's just as well you should know; it may save worse confusion by-and-by. She went off, six or seven years ago, with another man — a fellow who pleased her better, I suppose. He could give her more of what she wanted than I could—prestige and place and power, and all that. She always coveted exalted social standing, and now she's got it. The fellow's filling a big hole in Washington, and she's in glory. I haven't heard a word from her, one way or the other, since she left me. That's all. It's nothing to feel strange about. I never let it embarrass me with my friends."

His manner was in keeping with his words. He dropped the theme quite carelessly and offered another. But the talk lagged lamely in spite of him, and David soon arose and took his leave.

"I'll be in in the morning, then," he said, in parting. "I'm ready for work now."

"All right," the other answered, cordially. "Here; better take my key. I suppose you're used to being up and around before daylight; but I don't get to the office till about nine. Just make yourself at home, and when I come I'll hunt out some books for you."

David walked through the streets like a man who has drunk of old wine—floating, not thinking of his steps. There were not many people abroad, for Omaha is still soberly provincial in its amusements. The lights were put out, save in the

scattered restaurants and saloons. Here and there a hack or coupé was drawn up against the curb, waiting for chance patronage. The occasional electric cars sped over thoroughfares almost deserted. He gave no conscious heed to these appearances; his thoughts were thickly peopled with myriad images, belonging to the new world that had been opened to him.

When he entered his boarding-house he went up-stairs to his room and lit the single gas-jet that swung from the wall above the cheap wash-stand. It was ten o'clock, and he suddenly realized weariness. He would go to bed and be fresh for the morning. As he went about his preparations he caught a glimpse of his face reflected in his mirror, and paused, looking into his own eyes. They were not the placid eyes of home in the country, but quickened, shining with excitement.

"Oh, it's been great!" he cried. "She's a wonderful creature. I wish Ruth could know her." The name brought a fond smile to his lips. "Dear little Ruth!" he whispered, happily. He took out his watch and snapped open the back of the case, where a photograph lay hidden. He held it close to the light and stood for a long time gazing upon the tender, true face of his sweetheart. He was not trying to analyze his emotions; he had never practised that, for self-scrutiny is always more or less morbid, while he had known almost no mental habit save whole-

some, spontaneous impulse. His conclusion was not thought out, but came freely of itself.

"She's a fine woman, little Ruth, and it would do you good to know her. But I know a finer one!" He held the picture to his lips before putting it away; then he undressed, put out the light and stretched himself in bed. In five minutes he was sleeping soundly

IX

WHEN David reached the office in the morning, the building was not yet aroused to the business of the day. The janitors were still busy in the corridors and rooms with mop, broom, and dust-brush. It was a place of echoes; his own footfall upon the tiling sounded loud; and from the floors below came the cheery tones of the workers as they chaffed one another.

He let himself into the big, comfortable room and sat down in the silence. It was just to his liking, for he wanted to write the letter for which he knew his mother would be waiting. He had time to make a detailed story of his first day's adventures; when it was finished and sealed it made a thick packet, and he smiled as he imagined the satisfaction of the mother's heart. All was going well, he had told her.

Then he started a letter to Ruth; but for some undiscoverable reason that was not so easy to write. He filled many sheets with various beginnings, only to tear them impatiently into strips, and stopping often between whiles, losing himself in a tangle of thoughts and visions. His first page was still unfinished when the

stenographer entered. She looked at him in surprise.

"Good-morning!" he said, gayly. "A new broom, you see. I wonder if I'll ever get used to these hours, starting work in the middle of the morning. If I were at home I'd have been at the plough for the last three hours. I suppose it doesn't strike you as a lazy life, though, does it? That machine must get tiresome."

"Oh, I don't mind it," she smiled. "It isn't what one would choose for a whole life; but I'm very glad to have the work."

The morning's mail was brought in then and laid upon her desk, and she set to work opening and sorting it. She was not much given to talking; she met David's friendly advances in smiling good part; but the initiative was left mostly to him. Soon she took her place at her desk, and then the brisk staccato rattle of the typewriter made his own letter-writing impossible. He lay back in his chair, waiting, listening. The great building was awakening at last; feet were hurrying through the halls, with the crass accompaniment of men's voices, slamming doors, and the whine of the elevator cables.

A man came in hurriedly—a small, swart fellow, aquiline, nervous, intense, with the restless, hot eyes of one under strong excitement.

"Watson here?" he asked, sharply. "When will he be here?" When the question was answered he sat down by the table, tossing the

piles of magazines about until he had found one that suited him; but then he only flipped the leaves back and forth idly, drumming upon the table with his wiry fingers, fidgeting, twiddling the heavy seals upon his watch-chain, overwrought and ill at ease. David felt a sense of relief when a ponderous tread sounded in the corridor and Watson entered.

The freshness of the morning had not affected him outwardly; he was slow, burly, morose. He spoke a brief, inclusive greeting, then glared in quick anger at the visitor.

"*You* here? What do you want? I told Hicks I wanted you to keep out of my way entirely. Didn't he tell you?"

"Yes, yes!" the other answered, hastily. "That's all right; he told me. It won't do, though. You've got to talk to me. Come in here a minute." He offered to pass into the private office, but Watson's bulk was immovable in the doorway.

"I don't want to talk to you," Watson said, harshly. "It's no use. You contemptible hound! I've been hating you and biding my time for ten years, waiting to get a chance at you to even things up. Do you imagine I'm going to let loose now, when my chance has come? I told Hicks yesterday, and I tell you now, that I'm going to crush you."

"For God's sake, Watson!" the little man pleaded. "Come inside. I tell you you must

talk to me. I'll do what's right—there! I'll let you dictate the terms—anything you want; but, for God's sake, don't ruin me without giving me a hearing. Come!"

Grudgingly, against his will, his big body yielding part by part, Watson made way and the door went shut after them. It was a stormy interview, and long drawn out. An hour passed, and they were still at it. Watson's voice led the way at first, stern, inexorable, and the other followed excitedly behind, like a little dog yapping at the heels of a bellowing bull. But as the hour drew near to its close the bellow grew less and less insistent, and the smaller voice held on in long, tense periods. At last there was silence; then the door was flung open and the visitor hurried out and down the corridor.

Watson was in an execrable humor. For a long time he paced the floor of his room, muttering in his throat, raging at the things that got in his way. By-and-by he called, rudely, "Come in here, Boughton, and sit down." But still he kept on with his rolling walk, talking to himself in incoherent snatches. The steam escaped with a hiss around the valves of the radiator, and he spoke in exasperation: "Shut off that damned sizzle, will you?" A man was at work in the hall outside, whistling shrilly. Watson broke out in violent denunciation: "If I could get hold of that idiot I'd put his mouth into a shape that couldn't be reconciled to a whistle!" Then,

suddenly, he dropped into his chair and gave way to a thunderous roll of titanic mirth.

"Oh, it's a funny proposition, this life!" he said. "Boughton, I've played the fool. I'm not fit to be trusted in a man's part. What do you think I've done? That Bronson—that fellow that was in here—you saw him. One of the most unworthy scoundrels that ever breathed! He's betrayed every man that ever put faith in him. He betrayed me once—did me a cruel injury, ten years ago; and I swore I'd be even if I gave up my life to it. And now, just when I've got him in the shambles, with the knife against his throat, he comes in here and talks me out of it! If I'd speak ten words of plain truth to the newspapers here, he'd be ruined. And I meant to do it, too. It would have been a service to the town. Boh! It makes me sick!" His great body heaved with emotion; he snorted with self-disgust. Then the laugh asserted itself again. "Oh, well; maybe it's just as well. Damn it all, I ought to have taken his blood; but maybe he's carrying all he can stand without that. Death 'll come soon enough, anyway, and square everything—for him and me, too. I had my revenge, anyway. I called him a Barmecide, and it stumped him. He didn't know what it meant. I'll bet he thought a Barmecide was some kind of a poisonous drink!"

He was himself again after that, jovial, kindly, almost light-hearted.

"You want to begin your reading, don't you? Well, look here; how will this strike you for a school-room?" There was another room opening from his own—a smaller, cosier place. A broad-topped desk stood by the one window, and before it was one of those enticing, deep chairs to which Watson seemed so much attached. "You can use this place, if you want. I don't need it often, and you can be quieter here than any place else. If you like it, I'll fix you with some books."

He came in presently, carrying a thick, calf-bound volume.

"Here; you might look over this for a few days, and see how it agrees with your digestion. Then we'll have a talk."

He went out, closing the door. With a long sigh of satisfaction David sat down by the window, opened the book upon his knees, and his mind bit hungrily at the first lines:

"A law is a rule of action, prescribed by the supreme power of a State, commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong."

He bent to his reading with the zest of one whose mind, after long delay, has been admitted to the presence of its mistress. From the first, the law seemed the one thing for which his understanding had been fashioned, and for which he had been waiting. Every new page that he turned in the ponderous volume was as a fragment of the great mosaic of reason; and the frag-

ments fitted together as though the whole had been contrived by divine will. It was a fair and beautiful plan of human conduct; as it slowly unrolled before him, he wondered that men should find life puzzling or difficult when they could have recourse to such a sure guide over the paths of perplexity. He was moved to say this to Watson at the end of his first week's reading; but Watson only scoffed.

"Oh, certainly! If every citizen of Omaha was a Blackstone, we could fire all the judges off the bench. But it's well to be modest. We haven't more than three or four Blackstones at the bar here, and they're all badly overworked. No, Boughton; it won't do. We've got far away from that—from elementary right and wrong, and justice and injustice; we've got ourselves all balled up in law-making, and we've forgotten pretty nearly everything about the old fashion of law-giving. Why, you've known some members of the Nebraska legislature, and I suppose you've known a judge or two. Great stuff, aren't they? Great! Well, they make our laws for us. Politics! That's the keyword these days; not right or justice. The only way in which a man can get himself raised to a position where he has authority to decree right and justice is by going head over heels in debt to politics and politicians. I tell you, the best service I ever do for a client of mine is to coax him to keep out of the courts. I mostly tell him that if he'll do that, his chances

of getting justice are fair to middling; but if he insists on going to law, I won't be responsible for what he gets. And yet it's the duty of every good citizen to keep up a devout show of respect for the institutions! Lord!"

"Is it so bad as that?" David laughed. He had learned that the ingredients in a Watson argument were usually about one-half thought and the other half sheer momentum. Let that big brain once get fairly started on the trail of an idea, and it must bump against the end before it could stop. He took this tirade as a mere daring adventure of the intellect into an unfrequented and dangerous place.

"Yes, it is," Watson retorted. "The trouble is, there are too many trying to make a living at it. Omaha has three hundred of 'em—three lawyers to every thousand men, women, and children! It stands to reason they can't all live honestly. We could kill off two hundred and fifty, and still have more than enough to attend to the legitimate business. Omaha is no worse than the average, either. It's getting to be a profession of craft and cunning more than of learning. We're drowning spontaneous, manly virtue in oceans of penal statutes; we're obscuring justice and righteousness in a fog of opinions and dicta and precedents. You know what Walt Whitman says, talking about the courts establishing right—'As if the right might be this or that, according to decisions.' Old Walt's book of

crippled verse is a better text-book on justice and equity than any volume of law that's been printed in the last fifty years. It's a great sight more practicable, too. Honestly, if I were in doubt on a plain question of right and wrong, even in big affairs, I'd sooner take counsel with some pious, motherly old woman than with any lawyer I know."

He was upon his feet, pacing back and forth across the room, moved by an excitement that was more than rhetorical. He paused before David, squaring his massive shoulders, throwing out his hands in an aggressive gesture.

"Why, you can't correct evil by making rules for righteousness. You can't wipe out original sin by an act of legislation or a decree. It's a senseless piece of business. A State may have tons of statutes and a system of jurisprudence big enough to sink a ship, and still be rotten at heart. No, sir; it's not law that counts, but motives; and motives can't be set down in print. The more you hedge an honest man about with artificial rules of conduct, the more you hamper him; and the more law you give a dishonest man, the stronger the buttresses he'll build around his iniquity. That's what you've got to learn, my boy, before you'll be fit to practise law."

But David could not bring himself to accept such gross logic, even though it assumed the guise of a fiat. To his fresh understanding the spirit of the law was as a pool of Bethesda, in

which a lame, halt, blind, and leprous society had but to plunge and be healed. In his utter simplicity he took it for granted that all men must be like himself, creatures of right impulse, eager to be cured of their infirmities, desiring nothing so much as light. And every sentence of the sturdy old commentator was a flash of clear, white radiance. He could hardly wait to get to the end of a page, so impatient was he for the next. The days were all too short. More often than not he took his book to his room in the evenings; then after supper he would stretch himself upon his bed, prop the volume against his lifted knees, and read far into the night. He could not get enough of it.

He had made no plans, had taken no thought for anything save his studies; this mental stimulus was pleasure enough. With his abounding vigor he felt no need of unbending. He had no desire except to get on with his reading. When he was hungry he ate, and when his senses grew weary he slept. Those indulgences were all the relaxation he needed. He had almost no acquaintances in town; social life would not be likely to make any demands upon him, he thought. He got so wholly engrossed that every fact and relation which did not pertain to the law appeared trivial, even unsubstantial. His mother, the workers on the farm, even Ruth herself, were out of his thoughts for most of the time; only when his light was put out and he lay in the darkness,

waiting for sleep, did they come to him for a little undivided attention; and then they appeared as beings from another part of his existence. He loved them dearly, and his love would never abate; but it was written on another leaf of his mind. He had to turn back to that leaf now and again, to refresh the impression. It was not like forgetfulness or heedlessness, but only singleness of purpose that possessed him—the characters on the new leaf before his eyes were absorbing, enthralling. None but a man very much alive and very much in earnest knows that intense susceptibility to the present moment and its interests.

X

HE aroused after a few days to a guilty sense of obliquity in having neglected his dinner call. His life had held few of the responsibilities of polite formality. In the country, men discharge such duties in the intervals of convenience, when weather or season suspends the labor of the fields. A social debt incurred at "spring ploughing" may not fall due until the stress of corn-husking is past. But he appreciated the new relations; and one evening he dressed with care and followed his card to Watson's parlor.

At the threshold he paused in sudden embarrassment. Three callers were ahead of him—good-looking young fellows, of the conventional dandy type. One was in evening dress; all were carefully gotten up. Watson was not present, but his daughter sat enthroned on a couch in the midst of the group, a queen in her own right—stately, composed, transcendently lovely.

Upon his entrance she arose at once and came to greet him; and this time her hand showed no reluctance in meeting his· it was given freely.

"Mr. Boughton!" she said, cordially. "Really, this is very good of you, to spare an evening to

me. My father has been telling me how busy you are." She turned to the company and presented David with a fine grace of friendliness, then made a place for him at her side.

The other men, who had been talking, had now fallen silent. He knew that they were appraising him; and he knew, too, that, judged by their standards, he would be found wanting. His person and dress set him quite apart from them. There is no creature so disconcerting to a frank, friendly country lad as the amateur gentleman; and these were all amateurs, brought up from obscure levels by the lucky accidents that befall in a new community—a timely turn in real estate, a strike in the corn-market, or a deal in railway building. They were dapper, studiously elegant, making brave essays in manners; but it was very plain that there had not been time since the days of their rude sires for an ingraining of refinement. They were too conscious, too watchful of themselves lest they make a slip; at the same time they were continually guilty of that worst of violations of good-breeding, the assumption of an air of lofty superiority to the very conditions which had made their present life possible. Their consciousness was infectious. For the first time in his life David's thoughts dwelt upon himself and his appearance, with an effect of disparagement. Though he despised himself for it, it persisted. His hands were broad, brown, muscular; his heavy, firm-fleshed legs seemed grossly prominent; and

when he tried to ease their posture of stubborn strength, there was no result but a clumsy awkwardness. He felt, too, that his comfortable, loose-fitting cutaway suit of gray cheviot was almost indecently conspicuous beside those politer blacks. It was only with an effort that he shook off this mood and gave his attention to the girl at his side.

"I'm glad you've come," she smiled. "I've been doing single combat for half an hour against three, and I'd like to rest my sword-arm. I've been defending an out-door poem. Won't you help me? See! Read that."

She offered a copy of a new magazine, laying her finger upon an eight-line scrap of verse that was tucked away in modest seclusion at the bottom of a page, where its end seemed utilitarian rather than literary—it was merely a stop-gap. But David read with mind wide awake to its witchery; and the name in small type after the last line kindled in him a spark of personal delight.

"Why, it's Joe Keller!" he cried.

"What?" the girl questioned. She bent over, reading the name aloud. "'Joseph Standish Keller.' Joe Keller? Why, Mr. Boughton, do you know him?"

"Know him!" David laughed. "He's about the best friend I have in the world. He's the one man I do know, heart and soul. He lives out by Waterloo, on the farm next to ours."

"A Nebraska man?" she asked, with quickened interest. "And you know him! Now isn't that delicious! Oh, I'm very glad you've come! Won't you tell us about him?"

"Yes, do," one of the young men seconded, politely. "It would be interesting. One doesn't think of poets as beings sustained by one's own atmosphere—the very air that one breathes at the daily grind. It's rather remarkable, isn't it, that one man can eat bread and beef and suck in oxygen and turn them into a poem, while another can get nothing out of them but a sordid capacity for operating a bank or a packing-house?"

The saying was tossed off lightly, carelessly; its dilettantism made it seem vapid, inane, and aroused in David a feeling of dislike for the speaker. The three laughed together over the abortive trial at humor. Their laughter was like their speech — tentative, conditional, as though they nursed the fear that a genuine outburst of mirth would be an altogether unwarranted emotional excess, violating some mysterious dictum of "good form." The vulgarian is always in terror of the unwritten laws of behavior, and his terror is greatest when he is endeavoring to obey them.

"I dare say we're too intensely practical in the West," one of the others suggested. "The pork-packer hires the poet to write verses extolling the superior quality of his hams and lard, and

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that's about the extent of his notion of encouraging art. So soon as we see a spark of divine fire, we want to catch it on a wire and turn it into power for driving the wheels of business. It's a profanation, of course; but, then, the pork-packer's money keeps the poet's stomach filled and keeps the spark alive; so perhaps—"

"Oh, spare us, please!" the girl interjected. "I want Mr. Boughton to tell us of his friend."

The three fell at once into mild silence, regarding David with a fair semblance of well-bred attention. But their empty persiflage had ruffled him. He had never learned the pretty trick of altering his thoughts to meet the exigencies of social conversation for the sake of making clever effects; what he thought must be said outright and candidly, or not at all. He determined that he would not hold up his honest admiration of his friend for the amusement of these smartlings.

"No, I can't tell you much about him," he said to Margaret. "He's a splendid fellow, and I know you'd like him. He'll be in Omaha some time soon, and I'll bring him to see you, if you'll let me."

"Indeed I'll let you!" she cried. "It would be a real pleasure."

"It's a real pleasure to me to find you defending his poem," he said, simply. "It's worth it, because he never writes anything he doesn't mean, and that's not a common quality, in poets or anybody else. He'll be glad to meet you, too. I've

written to him about you—about my first night here, and your music."

"Ah!" one of the listeners broke in. "Has Miss Margaret played for you, Mr. Boughton? You're a fortunate man. She never plays for any of us; nothing would induce her. These artists have their caprices, you know, and the man who's allowed to profit by them ought to be grateful."

"It isn't always caprice," she said, with slow calm. "Sometimes it's discernment."

"Oh, now!" the youth protested. "Don't be too severe with a chap!" He arose in undisturbed good-humor; his mates followed his example, and the three made a graceful exit.

When they were gone, Margaret returned to her place on the couch at David's side, where she sat leaning idly back against the cushions, regarding him out of half-closed eyes, her face held in inscrutable quiet. He met the look with wonder, almost with distress, until, as on the former meeting, by a transition too swift to be realized at once, she flashed into animation, her wonderful eyes, her scarlet lips, her hands, her very attitude instinct with life.

"I was driving in the country all afternoon," she said, brightly. "I wished more than once that I had you with me, to interpret. There was so much I didn't understand in the least. I'd never noticed it before. I think it must have been what you said the other evening about outdoor music that awakened me."

She appeared not to intend it, but there was in her words a flattery delicate and elusive as the perfume of her hair to his nostrils. She had been keeping him in her thoughts.

"Isn't it strange," she went on, "how we can look for a lifetime on nature, seeing only the coarse shells of things, until something happens to clear our vision? I've driven over the same road a hundred times before, so that I knew every field along the way, and almost every tree and fence-post; but it never meant anything more to me than so many acres of 'view.' I've seen a hundred finer views, too—scenes that looked as though they had been arranged by real masters of the art. These low, round hills have always seemed so conventional and tame, until I began to-day to wonder whether they hadn't a meaning all their own. Then I began to see. You can't blame a *pastorale* because it isn't a fugue, can you? Why isn't a stretch of rolling prairie as good as a ragged mountain?"

She paused, smiling into his eyes, expecting a reply. For a moment he could not collect his thoughts clearly. Whether it was from the grace of her idea, or the tacit invitation that he would share in it, or the charm of her manner, or the fascination of her physical presence, or all combined, he felt himself stirred with a strange delight, vibrating as under the touch of a hand that grasped the full range of his emotional powers.

"Yes," he answered at last, when he was com-

pelled to say something. "I suppose the prairies mean really more than the mountains. They do the world's work, and the mountains only loaf and look magnificent."

"That's it!" she cried, with the pleased laugh of a child. "A mountain signifies nothing but a cataclysm, and the world couldn't live on cataclysms alone."

Then, with another of those sudden changes of mood which characterized her, and which became her so well, she fell again into her earlier calm.

"I saw something to-day that impressed me," she said. "I went up to the woods above Florence, where you can look down over the river, and I came on a great elm that had been killed by lightning—all split and broken and twisted. I've seen bare forests in winter, but they weren't half so striking as that one dead tree standing solitary in the heart of a wilderness of living green. I've been trying to translate it into music. The *motif* came to me while I was listening to the sound of the wind in the soft leaves and in those leafless branches. I shall play it for you some day, when it's finished."

"Oh!" he said, with surprise and pleasure. "Some work of your own? I didn't know you had that gift. I suppose I ought to have known it, though, by instinct."

Her evident satisfaction in his pleasure encouraged him, and he went on with his habitual frank honesty. "I've thought that musical genius is

the very highest of all; the genius to create music, I mean. It's finer than poetry, isn't it? Because nature talks to us in music and not in words. If you try to put a thing into words, there are so many chances for getting it wrong; but music seems always true." Then he thought of Keller, with an odd sense of having been, somehow, unfaithful to the genius of his friend. "Yet the one poet I know is as true as any man could be," he said, quickly. "I shall be impatient to have you meet him. I know you'll like him; I'm as sure of that as I am that he'll like you. He's a musician, too—a violinist. The people out around home don't begin to understand him. They think he's nothing but a freak. He's independently wealthy, and could do anything he pleased; but he's built himself a little, three-roomed log-house in the woods over there beside the Elkhorn, and seems just as happy as a squirrel in a hollow tree. I don't believe he could be driven away by anything short of artillery. Oh, I know you'll like him! I'll bring him up the first time he comes to town. Then you'll play your new music for both of us, won't you?"

"Perhaps," she answered, a little absently. "I sha'n't promise that, though. I can't play for many people; I don't try to play unless everything is right."

Soon the town-clocks sounded a chorus of warning, and he arose reluctantly. She gave him her hand again in parting. Its touch was lingering,

not at all shy. His strong fingers closed upon hers and held them firmly while he spoke his good-bye.

"Come and see me whenever you like," she said, gently. "This hotel life isn't much to invite you to, but now and then you may meet some pleasant people."

"You are good to me," he said. "People whom you find enjoyable must be something out of the ordinary."

She laughed at him with her eyes, though her lips were held in check. "You are praising yourself—just a little," she hinted.

Then, while he lingered, Watson's burly tread came along the hall, and his burly form filled the doorway.

"Hello, Boughton!" he said, cordially. "You here? And those other fellows gone? I wish I'd known it. I've been torturing myself for an hour, walking around the billiard-table, poking with a fool stick at a bunch of little fool balls. I detest billiards, but not half so much as I detest those crowing hens. Did you meet 'em? It's no secret between Margy and me how thoroughly I abominate 'em. They always make me think of those witticisms that must have their points printed in italics or you lose 'em. There isn't blood enough in a whole townful of such chaps to fill the veins of a healthy monkey. Say, sit down a minute. Don't go yet. I've got something to tell you."

He took his favorite seat, easing his bulk upon

the cushions; but then he was slow in making a beginning. His brain held tenaciously to its last theme; it had a bull-doggish grip on everything—the grip of the fighting intellect; it was loath to let go of an idea, however unimportant, until it had been shaken into subjection.

"Those dudes!" he growled. "I mightn't think so hard of 'em if I hadn't known their beginnings. Their fathers were men who came across Iowa in prairie-schooners forty-odd years ago—great, big, coarse, honest fellows — men, every one of 'em, afraid of neither life nor death. They laid the foundations of the West, and then brought up families of sons to be ashamed of 'em. I've seen that young Stone go across the street in the middle of the block to avoid meeting his dad face to face, just because the old man goes without a collar and smokes a cob pipe in public. He's worth a million of his son any day. He's got brains, for one thing; and all the brains the young one ever had were painlessly extracted in college. He hasn't character enough to stop a worm-hole in a chestnut. He's one of the thin-blooded sort who make misanthropy a fad. He never knew a serious conviction in his life. He'll go dawdling along through this world, just as he is now, without a particle of manliness in his make-up; and then he'll step into the next life in just about the same way—finding paradise 'rawther pretty and interesting, don't you know, for those who like that sort of thing.' Faugh!"

He sat for a time fondling the creasy folds of his big chin, glowering heavily; then his face cleared of its cynicism, settling into firm lines.

"Maybe the evening hasn't been lost," he said, at last. "I've been talking with some fellows down-stairs, and I've about made up my mind to go into the senatorial fight this winter. What would you think of that?"

"For yourself, do you mean?" David asked.

"Yes, of course; for myself. I've been thinking some about it, off and on, for the last fifteen years, and now I think I'll try it. I reckon I can make it. I've got a few good, stout friends, and I've got plenty of just the right kind of foes to help me along. Half the game is to be sure of your enemies. I've always fought the machine here, and this looks like an off year for machine politics. That man Bronson would be against me, for one. I wouldn't want anything better than a chance to fight him to a stand-still. If I go into it, I'll win. I was just trying to make up my mind whether it's worth the pains."

"Worth the pains!" David cried. "To go into the Senate? Why, I thought any man in the West was ready to sell his birthright for a place there."

"Yes," Watson answered, dully, "I guess that's true of most of us. It was true of me once, when I had a tighter hold on ambition. But I've got past that. I'm not ambitious any longer. All I'd expect to get out of this now would be something new to think about for a while."

David glanced at Margaret, who had been listening silently. What he saw in her diverted his thoughts sharply from the subject in hand. She sat erect, attentive, her hands knotted together in her lap, her lips parted, her eyes ablaze. She did not look at him; she seemed quite oblivious to his presence; all the energy of her being was concentrated in the gaze she fixed upon her father's face — eagerness, desire, rapt absorption of her whole mind.

Watson's eyes followed the direction of David's glance, and he gave a short, harsh laugh.

"What do you think, Mag?" he asked. "That would suit you, wouldn't it?"

She relieved the rigor of her posture with a long, stifled sigh, settling back with a palpable effort into her usual placidity. Her voice was curiously out of keeping with her recent manner; it betrayed no more than a casual interest in the theme.

"I should be glad, of course. It would mean a great deal to win against Carruthers and Bronson, and the rest. But I wonder if you would better undertake it, after what Dr. Johnstone said."

"Oh!" Watson broke out, roughly. "Johnstone! What's that got to do with it? A doctor's counsel is all well enough when a man has leisure for coddling; but it doesn't signify when there's anything to be done. I'd rather die to-morrow in a fight than live forever in my chair."

"Good!" David cried. He, too, loved the notion of strife; but his was only the swift, raptur-

ous lust of youth. Though he thought himself at one with Watson's temper, he would have been terrified by a clear glimpse into the depths of the older heart. "So you think you'll try it?" he asked.

"I guess so," Watson returned, slowly. "I might as well, I reckon. I'm getting deadly tired of this way of living. Nailing my soul to the cross; and for what? Building a reputation as a lawyer! What, in the name of God, do I care for that? It's all very well for boys like you to play with such pretty visions of fame and dignity; but they aren't for me. I've got to the time of life when I must have something firmer to hold on to —something a good deal more substantial than the invertebrate pride of reputation. I've fought here until there's nothing left worth fighting for. I need a change of scene and air and enemies. I want a chance to pit myself against some bigger men. That's what will decide me, and not the honor of position."

He got up and pulled open one of the long windows that led out upon a small, iron-railed balcony fastened against the brick wall of the building.

"It's too warm in here," he grumbled. "Come outside a minute, Boughton."

As David arose, Margaret also stood up.

"I think I shall go to my room," she said, quietly. She was trembling; her face had taken on an ashen pallor, save for two burning flecks of red in her cheeks; her eyes were feverishly brilliant.

"Good-night," she said; and with that she was gone.

"Your daughter is ill," David said, anxiously; but Watson dissented with a gesture.

"No; she's all right." They moved out to the balcony and stood together, leaning over the rail, looking down into the street.

XI

IT was a quiet scene at that hour of the night—quiet in its almost entire absence of movement; but there was about it still an atmosphere of restlessness. The carbons in the swinging arc-lamp directly below snapped and sputtered under their high current; the motor on a passing car called aloud in a voice full of the pain of tension; the heels of the few passing pedestrians clicked sharply against the stones. Over these nearer *allegro* notes rose the far *largo* roar and rumble of the city's palpitant life—a life that was a stranger to deep, healthy repose, knowing only the stealthy quiet of a sleeping panther, ready to start awake at a whisper.

Watson dropped his head heavily upon his arms, that were lying across the railing, and his great body shook under the stress of a stifled groan.

"Oh, Lord God! I wish I had something or somebody to tie to. I'm all adrift. I don't know what's going to become of me." He started suddenly erect, striking his hands together in a burst of impotent passion. "Boughton, do you know what it is I'm living for? It isn't the things

I'm doing, or hope to do, or to be, or to gain. To hell with all that! I'd be glad to lay it all down now, and to wander around all the rest of my days a tattered, homeless, nameless vagabond, if I could sit down for a single hour and talk with a woman who's capable of unselfish genuineness—one who's large enough to bear the sort of love that doesn't wear a tag with its price marked on it in plain figures. I don't want to possess her; I only want to look at her just once, and hear her speak, and have my opinion of womanhood restored." His voice fell in a moment from its full-toned intensity to the level of apathy; his lifted shoulders settled and drooped, as though they were adjusting themselves to a heavy load. "I don't expect to find her," he said. "I don't believe she exists."

David turned upon him in shocked astonishment.

"What?" he cried. "You can't mean that, Mr. Watson."

"Why not?" Watson demanded, raspingly.

"Because it isn't true. I know you wouldn't say it if—if things hadn't happened wrong with you. It isn't true."

"Ah!" Watson breathed. "I hope it may never be true for you. It doesn't turn out true for all men, apparently. I used to believe in women; God knows I did. And God knows how much that belief meant to me, before it was taken away. Since then, all I've been trying to get

out of my life and my work has been forgetfulness." He was speaking slowly, painfully, as though his every word was a burning torture to some raw wound in his soul. "I've been forced to think that most of our failures and disappointments in this life come from a mistaken exaltation of sentiment. Our beliefs aim so much higher than the facts warrant. Women aren't different from men; it's only a piece of cheap gallantry to say so—a mighty cheap, flimsy lie. Given the right conditions, and every virtue we possess, of men or women, comes tottering down into the mud. You can't understand that—you boy! There was a time when I would have fought the man who dared to say it in my hearing. Oh, it was cruel—hellish cruel—to have the disillusioning come to me through my own wife!"

He drooped forward again upon the rail and was silent, brooding upon what his words had suggested, leaving David for a time to his own thoughts.

A man who has known nothing but perfect health is quite unable to sympathize with the ailing. David's normal soul stopped far short of knowledge of the other's affliction; the sombre words were to him nothing more than a naming of morbid symptoms; the real pain of the disease was not to be communicated to him. He was almost ready to be amused by Watson's dark despair, as a sound and ruddy friend smiles at the vagaries of an invalid. Surely these were only

the casual hallucinations of spiritual distemper. David's ready imagination produced a picture of Ruth; and if he had felt so much as a tremor of misgiving, it sank to rest. By a quick association of ideas, he thought of the girl who had just left them; and with that he was easily satisfied. Watson must have forgotten.

"There's your own daughter," David said.

Watson turned slowly about, bringing his face into full view in the yellow light that shone from the open window. It was a face not good to look upon — stern, cold, granitic; and its hard rigidity yielded not a line at the suggestion.

"Yes, there's my own daughter," he echoed. "I was thinking of her, too, when I spoke."

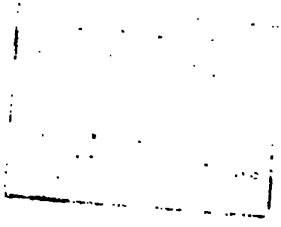
David's heart quickened its beat; his lips were hot with a rising rebellion of words. "You don't mean—" he began; but Watson checked him with uplifted hand.

"We won't talk about that, if you please," he said. He waited a moment, continuing his steady scrutiny of the young face; then he turned away abruptly. "No. If the sort of woman I mean exists at all, she's rare. Sometimes I compel myself to think that if I'd been another sort of man, I'd have found her. But I'm mostly of the opinion that she doesn't exist."

"Other men have found them," David cut in, shortly.

"Other men have found what they have found. I can't answer for them. They've taken what

"'YES, THERE'S MY OWN DAUGHTER,' HE ECHOED"



they could get, apparently, and have been satisfied to call it square, without prying too closely into the roots of things. I guess it's just as well, though," he said, with a long, dull sigh. "If you want to match motives, I suppose there isn't one man in a million who could bear the test of being honestly loved by a woman who didn't want something from him. After all I've been through, and all I've seen, I reckon the best thing that can happen to the average man is just to take some woman who's decently like his poor notions of a wife, and live along with her in orderly domesticity, if he can manage it, keeping himself faithful to his home, being fond of the children he begets, doing the best he can to provide for them, asking no questions, and quitting it all at last in passionless quiet. If a man can get along with that, he's lucky."

"Oh, Mr. Watson!" David ventured, sincerely. "I'm sorry to hear you say that. I'm always sorry to hear any man speak lightly about women. I've never known one — not one — who wasn't worthy and honest and true. I don't believe I'm alone in that, either."

For answer Watson broke into a deep, booming laugh, that rolled thunderously back to them from the walls across the street. "All right, boy," he said. "We'll let it go at that. That was only a side issue, anyway. The main point to-night is that I'm going to the Senate. I rather like the idea, too. Maybe it 'll give me a chance to be of

some service to the West. At any rate, you'll be interested in the preliminaries. You'll see some of the men who are the guardian angels of Western destiny. They're a queer lot."

He began to smoke then, dropping into an abstracted silence whose surface was only occasionally ruffled by monosyllabic bubbles, stirred up by David's attempts to interest him. It grew into constraint by-and-by, and then David took his leave.

It was late when he reached his room, and he undressed at once and went to bed. But he could not sleep. The events of the last few hours lay hot upon his soul; he could not put them aside. Over all the other pictures that arose in his mind was that of Watson's daughter as she had stood before him when he first bade her good-bye, her hand resting lightly in his, serene, poised, but all alive and wondrously lovely. Then there followed another picture, blotting out the first—the picture of her strange perturbation as she listened to her father's declaration of his new purpose. Watson's harsh words concerning her echoed in his ears, giving him a boding uneasiness. He could not make it out.

XII

THE next day was Saturday, and David took the afternoon train for Waterloo. As he dismounted from his car and stood upon the narrow, littered station platform, it was with an impression of confusion. The little village, sprawling its lazy width in the autumn sunlight, its air heavy with somnolence, seemed at once familiar and strange; the shiftless creatures idling in the streets, almost every one known to him for many years by name and reputation, appeared now, after so short an interval of absence and contrasted interests, like figures that had suddenly stepped out of a dimly remembered dream or story and been galvanized into movement and a similitude of life. Even then the illusion was hardly complete; he had seen puppets in a Punch-and-Judy show more strenuously alive than these.

He left the station and walked up the formless road that made the centre of the town's inactivity. Acquaintances recognized him, hailing him listlessly from their easy postures along the edges of the crumbling walks or in the shelter of the wooden store-awnings. So long as fair weather continued these sidewalk shows of in-

dolence would go on. It was a relief to come at last upon a man who was on his feet and moving along in a quick, free stride.

They halted as they encountered, and the villager held out a thin, full-veined hand. "Well, David?" he said, with a tone of mild inquiry.

He was a stooping, pallid man, with the air of one who, if not yet aged, was still solicitously watchful of the years. His beard was untrimmed, dry, straggling; his rusty frock-coat, always so inseparable from the figure of the cleric, had once been a garment of ceremonious dignity, but was now nothing more than a pitiable week-day expedient for the preservation of Sunday decency. His black trousers were badly knee-sprung and shiny upon the thighs; his hat, his very neckwear, shared in the presentment of a cheap, close poverty; his collar was yellow with age and unskilful home-laundering, and its saw-edge caught irritatingly at the long, loose strands of his beard, so that he had acquired an habitual, nervous, sidewise jerk of the head in freeing his chin from this fretting grasp.

David greeted him with the accents of hearty liking. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Kennedy. I tried to get time to call on you before I went away; but there were so many things—"

"Yes, yes; of course; I know," the other interrupted quickly, with a manner that savored of propitiation. "It was good of you to think about us. Maybe some time—" He left the

sentence incomplete and struck into another. "Do you find the change in your labors agreeable? Or is it—" The question, too, came timidly to its end in the middle, as though from a long-continued custom of holding individual opinions in abeyance, even in trifles. He had passed his life in the labor of the ministry in obscure country villages, where the only show of getting along depended at bottom not so much upon spiritual zeal or intellectual acumen as upon adroitness in forecasting and reconciling himself to the spiritual and intellectual aberrations of a primitive people. At best that is not an expansive life, nor one calculated to stimulate individuality. No doubt he had his own ideas; but they were usually shy as rabbits, inclined to run to cover at the first alarm of opposition and to cower tremblingly in the thickets of formless speech.

"Oh yes," David answered to the implied inquiry. "I'm getting along famously. One of these days I'll turn out a credit to the Elkhorn country, and you'll all be recalling stories showing what a promising boy I was. How's your own work, Mr. Kennedy?" he asked, with a return to seriousness. "I should think you'd find it mighty hard sometimes, and discouraging."

"Oh yes," the clergyman agreed, with a stifled sigh. "Yes, that's true, in the moments when I get impatient, you know—when I feel, as most men do now and then, I suppose, that I'd like to see some visible results of my work. But I

try not to be impatient. It's a bad habit to form, don't you think so?—a little incongruous, perhaps, to be working for eternity and still expecting immediate returns on your work. I had some large plans when I was a young man, but they've rather—rather got away from me. I haven't weakened—no, no! I don't mean that at all; but I've quit making definite plans for myself. I'm learning, instead, to adapt myself to every day, and to trust that there's another hand than mine that's laying out the plan. I think that's safest; don't you? There's plenty to be done, without any need for planning ahead. It saves a good deal of disappointment, too. Well, you're in a hurry, aren't you? Give our love to your mother, and come and see us whenever you can."

David crossed the broad, sandy flat of common and entered the office of the hotel—a bare, dingy room, wanting in every attribute of cleanly decency. Three or four tousled fellows were seated around a broken table, playing a noisy game of seven-up; others of their kind stood around looking on, their sallow, inert faces deformed by quids of tobacco tucked into their cheeks. A frowsy German sat humped over on the end of an empty beer-cask, holding a wretched, lean kitten helpless in the grasp of his great paws, amusing himself by blowing pipe-smoke into its nose and eyes, while an ugly, crop-eared bull-dog crouched upon the floor before him, watching the torture with quivers and growls of fellow-feeling. A

dilapidated barber's chair stood in one corner, the floor for a yard around strewn with the week's clippings from many heads. In the chair sat Uncle Billy, submitting his snowy mane to the perils of a trimming.

David stepped to the old man's side, laying an affectionate hand upon his shoulder. "Hello, Uncle Billy!" he said, with a laugh. "Well, by Jupiter! What does this mean? Why, you look like a born dude."

The old fellow screwed his head around, peering up with twinkling eyes. He chose to ignore the need for a greeting; he spoke as though they had not been parted.

"Swell, ain't it? 'Mighty! Think you're the only one? Watch out there, Sam; don't take off too much. By jocks! it's so short now it 'most makes me blush—like I didn't have nothin' on but my flannels. Tell you what I'm a mind to do, Dave: I'm a mind to raise me a *mus*tache, an' one o' these here goat-waggles to my chin. If I was to, I don't b'lieve I'd have to go on a crutch no more. I'd make some o' you young colts take the sides o' the road, that's what I would." He sat squinting at his image in the cracked mirror, grinning, twisting his shrivelled leathern neck for better views of himself, preening with an innocent vanity. When the barber was through with him, he paid his little reckoning and limped from the chair. "Come on, boy," he said. "I got the team all hitched, over back o' the

stable. We better be startin'. I got an ar'nd to do, too."

When they were seated in the light road-wagon and had got off the main street into a shady by-way, David was content to keep his seat, looking abroad at the opening vista of prairie landscape, listening to the swift grind of the wheels upon the sandy road-bed and to the guileless prattle of his companion.

"We got the wheat all in," the old fellow said. "We planted the hill eighty two-three days after you left; an' we just finished the bottom quarter yeste'd'y. Everything's been just right. Dan's got a notion o' puttin' in an extra eighty where the Alsike's been. I don't know but I would, too. The clover's been there three years now; it ought to raise better wheat than any o' the rest. Wheat's always good prop'ty, too. A man ain't never in danger o' the poor-house long's he's got a few thousan' bushels o' winter wheat in his bins. We're goin' to ship some hogs next week; us an' Stuart's folks together can make up a car-load—fat as butter. I reckon we'll do it, if the price don't go down too much before Tuesday."

They came presently to an avenue branching from the section-road, and there Uncle Billy, with a furtive glance at David, turned his horses aside. "Got to stop at the creamery a minute," he said, in explanation. "Been kind o' helpin' 'round amongst the women folks a little, bringin' their cream over for 'em, an' I got to go get some o' the

cans to take back." But an alert nervousness was upon him; he was not giving his mind entirely to the team. The early dusk was settling, blurring the details of the broad landscape, idealizing it, as though it had received some finishing touches from the brush of a Corot. Uncle Billy was studying the prospect ahead with a curious interest, as though he had conceived all at once something of an artistic passion. At last he drew rein sharply, breaking into a gleeful cackle.

"Here she is!" he cried. "Hop out, Dave, an' help her up."

"Why, Ruth!" David called, to a shady figure by the road-side. "Is that really you?" He flung himself to the ground with alacrity, stretching his hands towards her in the semi-darkness. She met him with a laugh mellow as the unrestrained song of a lark.

"Really and truly!" she said, brightly. "Are you in doubt about it? Help me put these away some place, and then I'll argue it out with you."

She carried a pair of huge, empty milk-cans that were tied together by the handles and swung over her strong shoulders. David's heart warmed to the pastoral simplicity of her aspect. In the soft twilight, whose lingering glow suffused her buoyant figure, she and her burden seemed to belong to the free, wild prairie; she was an essential part of the scene; she could not have had a better setting for her luscious beauty.

He stowed her cans away at the back of the

wagon and helped her to mount to the rear seat, then climbed to the place at her side. Uncle Billy affected a jealous dismay.

"Well, I like that! Shakin' the ol' man that-a-way, to go set with the girls! All right, youngster, you can *set* with her, if you want to; only don't you let me ketch you tryin' to hold her hand on the sly. I won't stand that. No, sir; I'll make you get out an' walk. Jen! Ged *ap*, Phil!"

David laughed again, exultantly. "Not on the sly, Uncle Billy. It's going to be done fair and honest, so anybody can see that wants to look." But when he sought to take possession of her hand, it was stoutly withdrawn and hidden in the folds of her skirt.

"No, sir!" she said. "You must explain things first. I want to know why you haven't written to me?"

"Why, I did write," he retorted. "You know I did. I wrote you two letters."

"*They* weren't letters," she scoffed. "Just two teeny little notes, written big—just as big as could be, on only one side of the sheet. No, sir; that doesn't explain at all. I don't call a thing a real letter unless it's written so fine I have to squint to read it, on both sides, and all criss-crossed up and down. *That's* a letter."

He hesitated a moment before attempting an answer. Her chiding, though spoken half-mockingly, touched a delinquency which had troubled

him not a little. He had meant to write exhaustively, telling her everything about his new life, and making daring excursions into the future that was to be theirs in common; he had counted much upon the joy it would give him, and the steadfastness of purpose he would gather from her sympathy and understanding; yet the days had slipped by without adequate performance. They had parted as lovers. No confession of love need have been ampler than his, on that last night at home. Nevertheless, when he would sit down at his desk, with paper before him, he would find himself overwhelmed by a curious sense of insecurity in his attitude towards her—an insecurity that could not be stated in terms, but that was still real enough to his mind. A score of times he wished devoutly that he had asked her to be his wife when the chance had been his; then his doubts would have been dispelled. But he could not bring himself to take it for granted. Once he had started to put the plain question into form on paper, but it had eluded him—his ardor had suffered a distinct loss, wandering about through the idle forms of syntax and rhetoric. He had given up the effort. He would wait a fit time and ask by word of mouth, out under the stars. As he looked upon it in his moments of tender retrospection, his love seemed to belong to the soft, starlit prairie nights, not to the garish city days; it was to be declared in whispered syllables from warm, living lips, not by the poor means of ink and pen and

paper. He had determined to wait; and in the mean time letter-writing had appeared unavailing, profitless. Now that he was in her presence again, his irresolution seemed fantastic, unjustifiable, and he put it aside with a feeling of grateful relief.

"Wait till I go back," he said, "and I'll write you a letter that 'll make talk in the post-office. You'll see!" He felt for her hand in its hiding-place, and this time he was suffered to find it and to gather it into his own warm clasp. "Now tell me about things. You haven't written to me at all, not even a teeny little scrawl. How have you been? What's been happening to you?"

"Oh, piles and piles of things!" she cried. "I can't begin to tell you. I've been awfully busy. Ma hasn't been a bit well, and I've had to cook for the men, and do most of the chores around the house—splitting wood, and feeding the pigs, and building a new brush-fence around the chicken-yard, and looking after the milk, and bringing the cream down to town, and—oh, everything! And it's awfully funny, too. I used to think, when I was a little girl and had to help ma, that when I grew up I'd be bound *I* wouldn't do any of that kind of work. I was going to sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam—I was going to be a lady, and not know a thing about work. But now that I have it to do, I'm just as happy and satisfied as I can be. Don't you think that's funny? I wouldn't trade places with any queen I know."

"'KEEP IT UP! I AIN'T LISTENIN'"

"Wouldn't you?" he asked. "Well, now, that's what they call a coincidence. I was just thinking I wouldn't trade places this minute with any king *I* know."

Uncle Billy spoke over his shoulder with clumsy jocularity. "An' I wouldn't swap with any two-spot in the whole dum deck. Keep it up! I ain't listenin'. You can say just what you're a mind to, an' I won't never let on I hear a word." He ducked forward on his seat, chuckling, wagging his head in self-appreciation. The girl was in no degree abashed by his pointedness; such honesty as hers was not to be easily frightened.

"Now you tell," she said to David. "What have you been doing?"

"Oh, heaps and heaps of things," he answered, in laughing imitation of her phrase. "I feel as if I've got to be almost a man of the world already, Ruth. It hasn't taken half as long as I thought it would." For the rest of the way he beguiled her with a lively rehearsal of his experiences in office, boarding-house, and street. The one thing above all others of which he had meant to tell her was his meetings with Margaret; but now that the chance had come he held back from it. The story was not for the alert old ears on the front seat, he told himself; he would keep it for Ruth alone. He did not mention Margaret's name. There was plenty besides to talk about, for he was a good observer and a graphic narrator. Ruth was a good listener, too, and Uncle Billy

more than once betrayed his own attention to the story.

"Oh, you're a smart boy," he broke in, by-and-by. "Next thing we know out here you'll be learnin' to lie an' cheat an' all them kind o' things. You'll be gettin' too high-toned for our set."

"Don't you believe it," David returned. "I'll come back to the farm when I see the first signs of that."

"I hear you say so. I've heern lots of 'em say so. I reckon everybody feels that-a-way, one time or other, yit there's always a middlin' fair crop o' liars. Tell you what I found out: I found out that lyin's a good deal like chawin' tobacker—don't taste right good at first, but you git after while so you kind o' like the smart on your tongue, an' then, pretty soon, first thing you know you can't git along without it nohow."

"Yes," Ruth broke in, with eager irrelevance. "And besides all I've told you, I've made myself a new dress, too—a perfect beauty! Every stitch my own work. Now what do you think of that? It's just as good as if I'd bought it and paid twenty-five dollars for it, but it only cost me six dollars. Isn't that thrifty? Oh, you've no idea what a miserly person I'm getting to be! I'm just terrible!"

With such talk the time sped on airy wings. They came all too soon to the end. As he helped her from the wagon before the gate at her home,

he held her hand for a moment between his own, reckless of Uncle Billy's enjoying oversight.

"I'll come over to-morrow for a little while," he said. "I must go back to Omaha on the afternoon train. I sha'n't have much time. I'll have to talk over some home business with Dan in the morning — about the new quarter we're buying — but I'll come over on my way down, if it's only for an hour."

XIII

HIS mother awaited him on the porch at home. If Uncle Billy's welcome had lacked emotion, hers more than atoned. She was as impatient to get her arms about him as though his absence had been long and full of peril. As she leaned upon him, walking through the hall to the kitchen —the family assembly-room—she was like a girl in her unrestrained pleasure.

"It's *good* to have you back again!" she cried, softly. "We've all been busy enough; but the house always seems empty, even in the busiest time, with any of my family gone away. I'm *glad* you're home!"

"Dear little mother!" he whispered, his cheek against her hair. "Do you think I'm not glad to be here?" He glanced quickly around upon the bare walls and simple furnishings. The table was spread in readiness for his late supper; a pot of coffee steamed cheerily on the back of the stove; from the door of the oven, standing ajar, issued a confusion of delicious odors. His glance came back to his mother's face, that beamed with homely joy, and there was a queer catch in his voice. "Sure I'm glad to be here!"

She hovered about him while he ate, heaping his plate with the choicest things from store-room and pantry, glad when she saw his unfailing appetite, rejoicing in the hearty accents of his voice, losing much of what he said in the simple delight of hearing him talk and knowing that he was hers again.

His Sunday hour with Ruth was not a shining success, from the point of view of the impatient lover. The day was filled with the needful discussion of the affairs of home. In quitting the labor of the fields, he had not meant to step from under his share of the responsibility of directing affairs. Dan, the elder son, was a giant in capacity for execution, but by tacit consent David was looked upon as having the adroiter mind, the subtler understanding, and as being the better endowed contriver of ways and means. On this Sunday there was a long conference between the brothers over the new extension of the farm. Dinner-time found many points still undetermined. It was well after one o'clock when David said his good-byes and set off for his coveted talk with Ruth.

Disappointment awaited him. The Milford family was assembled in force in the sitting-room, lethargic after its mid-day feed. Ruth was there, to be sure, a vision of wholesome loveliness, but around her was a noisy swarm of younger fry. Providence had prospered the family in no way more than in the gift of offspring; between Ruth

and the babe at the mother's breast were eight younglings of the house, in all stages of freckled, tow-headed awkwardness.

Mrs. Milford—a worn, child-ridden relic of fair womanhood—was walking the floor as David entered, hushing the infant in her arms. Ruth sat by a sunny, south window, a book of childish tales open upon her knee, her soft voice weaving a spell of enchantment around the souls of three or four of the smaller folk grouped upon the floor about her feet. In opposite corners of the room, seated upon the floor, their sturdy backs against the wall, were two cublike boys, glaring at each other in an avid longing for conflict. The father of the household—a big, red-shirted, red-bearded, red-cheeked specimen of out-door manhood—lay stretching his massive length upon a couch, his hat over his eyes, his deep chest heaving under the stress of his guttural snoring.

Ruth glanced up with a bright blush, letting her book fall shut. A chorus of remonstrant voices rose from those around her, and the half-sleeping babe awoke, squirming for release from the mother's arms, squealing a protest.

"Oh, I'm sorry," David said, helplessly.

"Never mind," Mrs. Milford returned, with a feeble attempt at reassurance. "I'll take her out to the kitchen and get her to sleep. These children are making too much racket, anyway. I was just startin' to do it when you come in. Don't bother. Set down."

David drew a chair to Ruth's side, striving against the rise of his embarrassment.

"Mother's had one of her dreadful sick-headaches to-day," Ruth said. "I haven't got my dinner dishes washed yet. I've been keeping the children quiet till she could put Annie to sleep, and then I'm going to try to get some of them to go to sleep, too. They won't often do it, though."

David glanced uneasily around upon the clamorous family. "Why, what's the matter with you, Dick?" he asked; but Ruth answered for the boy.

"He and Ben have been fighting, and they're being punished. They have to sit still in their corners for an hour. It's the worst punishment we can contrive on a nice day like this."

Dick drew the back of his mottled hand across his snub nose with a liquid sniff. "Little beast!" he challenged. "He stole the goodies I had picked out o' my walnuts at dinner."

"You're a liar!" Ben retorted, strenuously. "You eat 'em yourself. I saw you hoggin' 'em down on the sly after ma told you to quit. You was cryin' with a belly-ache, anyway."

"Boys!" Ruth cautioned. "You mustn't speak another word to each other—not another word! It's perfectly disgraceful the way you carry on. Now I want you to be still."

"Aw, you hush up!" said the rebellious Ben. "You ain't my boss."

"Ben!" she cried, with a pretty authority. The sleeping man stirred on his couch, threatening to

awake, and the youngster subsided into a sulky silence. From the kitchen came the shrill screams of the baby and the weary voice of the mother. The children at Ruth's feet were pulling at her skirt, pleading that she would go on with the interrupted reading, and refusing to be put off with promises. It seemed to be a time when a lover was a being quite superfluous, and David sat shifting his feet uneasily, making courageous efforts at speech, but realizing an ignominious failure. With no conscious thought of his own, a grotesque fancy came to him. In a day not long gone that inert, fleshy heap on the couch had laid ardent love at the feet of the pale, worn woman who now walked the kitchen floor, quieting her fretful babe, her aching head, no doubt, nursing some dull thoughts of life and romance.

"Go on with your reading, Ruth," he begged. "I'll just sit and look at you for a while." And she complied willingly.

His hour was almost gone when Mrs. Milford came in again, bearing the dead weight of the child, heavy with sleep. She passed through into an adjoining bedroom, then returned, brushing her shaking hands over her disordered hair, pulling at her calico gown, making a brave essay at a hospitable smile.

"I declare, these young ones most tucker me out sometimes," she said, with a listless patience. "Seems like the days I get these terrible headaches is always the very time they pick on

for their worst cuttin' up. Now, Ruthie, you gi' me the book. I'll amuse 'em, an' you go talk to Dave awhile."

"No, no," the girl answered. "You must go and lie down yourself. You must, because you need it. There's not much to do. I'll get through all right."

David looked at his watch and arose. "It's time I was starting for my train, anyway," he said, and picked up his hat.

Ruth walked with him through the shrub-grown yard and down to the road. They stood for a few moments with the gate between them. She smiled into his devouring eyes, and he laid his hands upon hers, that held to the tops of the weather-worn gate-pickets.

"You're a good girl, Ruth," he said. "I wish I could have talked to you a little while; but I'll fix it next time. I sha'n't be so busy at home when I come again."

There was a strident outcry at the house, a riotous outbreak of boyish taunt and defiance, as Dick and Ben found their release into the yard at the end of their imprisonment. Quick feet scuffled down the walk, and the freckled Dick appeared, climbing like a squirrel to a place on the top of one of the gate-posts, grinning down at David with an impudent intrusion of friendliness.

"Say, Dave," he shrilled, "I was down to the pick'rel-hole yiste'd'y, an' I got one, too. Golly, but he was a whopper! Only he got away, though.

He got my line all twisted around a darned old stump. If it had been Ben, I bet he'd 've just set down an' blubbered; don't you?"

"It's no use, Ruth," David said, with a helpless laugh. "I'll have to wait. I must go now; but I'll write to you. Good-bye, girl." He took her hand between his own, striving to make the pressure mean what he would have said. "Good-bye, Ruth."

XIV

UPON reaching the office early Monday morning, David found the inner room strewn with a tangle of newspapers, that lay over table, desk, and chairs, and on the floor was a high mound of the débris. Watson had passed his Sunday there, that was plain, and a hasty scrutiny of the inky head-lines revealed the reason. His candidacy was blazoned forth with all the perfervid rhetoric of provincial journalism — the purple-and-rose color of favor, the soberer grays and browns of neutrality, and the lurid reds and yellows of opposition. As always in such cases, there had been a hasty overhauling of his "record," and the reporters' discoveries were spread unsparingly to view. Nothing had been accounted too sacred for exploitation. The motives of the Western press are not lower than those of the East, perhaps, but its methods are wofully uncouth, and here was an exhibition of the worst that impudence could accomplish in advertising itself. Watson's life, both public and private, was chronicled with a shameless particularity; one sheet went so far as to flaunt, under double-column "scare-head," the story of his domestic misadventure,

presenting it with a commingling of brutal directness and hardly less brutal innuendo. Condemnation was unsparing, and laudation was even more revolting in its gross excess. There was in the whole matter an effect as though Watson's person and character had been smirched and fouled with ink. As David read the color mounted to his cheeks as with personal resentment.

While he was in the thick of it, Watson came in. At sight of the boy's perturbed face his deep eyes shone with amusement.

"We belong to the public now, my son," he said. "There's no kick coming. A man who courts notoriety must make up his mind to take it when it comes. I'm not pitying myself a little bit, so don't you waste any feeling over it."

"It's coarse," said David.

"It's human nature—the very humanest kind. I suppose the reason it doesn't affect me is because I'm human myself. I found that out long ago." He stood by one of the windows fronting Farnam Street, looking down upon the people who were going to their day's business, moving like columns of excited ants. His hands were clasped loosely at his back; his strong legs were spread far apart; his face was impassive, as though he stood apart from personal concern in the matter. When he spoke again it was with entire dispassionateness.

"It's singular how a man can be reconciled to conditions that he wouldn't have chosen for him-

self. We'd have a hard time of it if we couldn't adapt ourselves to conditions. When I was young I used to think I'd have a decent, orderly life. The one thing I wanted above all else was quiet. Yet fate has given me a turbulent career, from first to last. That isn't very strange, of course; but what amazes me is the way I've grown accustomed to it. I don't dream of rebelling any more."

He turned away from the window and rolled to his desk, dropping into his big chair. "It's all in a lifetime. If things came just as we wanted, it wouldn't lessen the mystery any; I reckon that would only make it more inexplicable." He laughed, forcing a half-hearted show of indifference. "I give it up, boy. The mystery has thickened from the beginning, year after year, until I positively refuse to be mystified by anything again. I'm just going to take things as they come, after this. If there's a Providence in it, its workings are beyond me. I might just as well quit worrying and settle down to this Senate fight." His laugh gained somewhat in genuineness. "I wonder what Providence thinks about American politics. I suppose the ways of the professional politician are as much of a mystery to the Almighty as His ways are to us. We'll get a lot of fun out of it, anyway. You'll be interested in the kind of men we'll have to deal with from now till January."

That was quite true. They were an interesting

lot, those politicians. Upon the public declaration of Watson's design, endorsed as it was by powerful local interests, they gathered from the four corners, as prairie-wolves assemble in response to the first shrill hunting-cry at night.

Day after day, from early morning until late at night, the office swarmed with a noisy horde, dirty, dishevelled, reeking with the evil odors that arise from the decay of civic respectability. We hardly seem to realize the grotesquery of it, but there is hardly a campaign in America whose practical conduct is not apparently left to the meanest and lowest of the people. From the first, decent citizenship had comparatively little to do with furthering Watson's prospects; decent citizenship came shyly in once in a while, spoke a quiet word, and went quickly away, leaving the field clear for the doings of the dirty, the dishevelled, the malodorous. David wondered, and his wonder deepened as the days passed; but Watson could not or would not take it in serious part. Only now and again he grew weary of it, and at such times he spoke his thoughts freely to David's private ear.

"The nation will wake up some day," he said once. "The theory's lovely, but the practice is damnable. We're hypnotized; the glitter of the idea of freedom and equality, and all that sort of rot, has put us in a trance, so that we don't feel the fangs that are biting at our very vitals. The regicide isn't any more of a menace to

society than the American professional politician."

David's apprehension did not go so far as that. He had observed the mob as mere social curiosities rather than active agents of evil—as most of us do, while preserving an easy sense of security, as though feeling that our institutions, springing somehow out of the divine idea of government, must rest upon foundations that are proof against disintegration.

"They seem harmless enough," David said. "If I had charge of 'em, I'd keep 'em washed and combed a little better; but I don't see where they're dangerous."

"That's it!" Watson growled. "That's always the cry. I tell you, rottenness is never harmless; there's death in it. No nation can live forever, of course. Ours will come to an end some time, like all the rest. When it happens, it won't be the result of war or great catastrophe; it 'll come from this deadly curse of professional politics. Just look at these louts that are hanging around here now! We shouldn't trust 'em to manage the finances of a chewing-gum slot-machine; yet we sit by and let 'em engineer the primaries and the conventions and the campaigns. They name our officers, and they dictate our policies and our laws, and it isn't once a year that folks like you and me give a serious thought to it."

"Maybe once a year is enough," David suggested, lightly. "Don't things get along pretty

well? Every day isn't a crisis, but when the crisis comes it gets settled all right."

"Oh," Watson scoffed, "that's a shiftless way to talk. That's what the sot says, and the morphine-eater, till after a while the coroner gets him. Half the work of the courts is a sort of coroner's work—looking after the dead, and clearing up the wreckage of our fool adventures in self-government."

But that was, after all, only a tentative concern. When David asked the plain question, "What's to be done about it?" the concern vanished.

"Done about it? Nothing. We'll just keep on pawing up the earth and screeching about equality till offended Heaven puts a stop to it. We aren't equals in brains, or virtue, or capacity for service or evil; to pretend that we're equals at all is nothing but a lazy expedient for saving trouble. Nobody believes it; everybody knows that he isn't the equal of any other one man on earth, to say nothing of the whole bunch. Oh, well," he laughed, "I don't care. What's the difference? If folks like to pretend that they can read the riddle of creation with one eye shut, let 'em pretend. I'm not going to worry over it. This pack of unwashed *canaille* can help me to a seat in the Senate, and I'm going to let them do it."

There were days together when that mood—a sort of intellectual abandon—ruled and moved him; days when his present personal purpose rose

singly above all else, dwarfing every item and every factor that entered into it. On those days he seemed heart and soul at one with the unlovely horde that beset him—jovial, companionable, suffering his hand to meet their soiled clasp, his eyes to meet their furtive glances, with a more than tacit confession of his need and dependence. If he felt any sense of humiliation, it did not show outwardly. He was like every other man who resigns himself to any form of the idea of destiny; he was merely a chip floating down stream, and it was not for him to object that the current was muddy. Those were his worst hours—hours when his own stubborn will, that would have struggled still towards some remote ideal of integrity, was laid aside, while his weary soul sported with the elusive phantasms of "practical" politics, as a child sports with flitting fireflies on a summer night, laughing to see the darkness pricked by little stabs of light, grasping at them eagerly, but grasping only the darkness. Those were not times of clear vision, of volition, of definite intent; rather were they times when the strength of his hold upon himself was relaxed—times of dull reaction after the long, grim tension of a resolute life. They marked a distinct breaking-down of moral tissue. He seemed himself half conscious of this, while lacking the nerve to combat it. David, observing him curiously day after day, saw that beneath the jocund assumption, the brusque hail-fellow air, the almost reckless friend-

liness with which he met the crowd, there lay an ineffable scorn and contempt, a loathing of himself no less than of them.

And there were times when this repugnance burst all barriers of restraint and revealed itself to the full.

One morning in the third week, when the election of legislators was past and the canvass was settling into definite form, there was a conference between Watson and two of his angels of destiny. As it progressed, David, though deep in his book, was made aware that it was not likely to end in peace. Watson was developing some portentous symptoms; he was beginning to choke with explosive mutterings, sounding from somewhere below, like a soda-geyser making ready for eruption. The eruption came at last in a burst that defied doors and walls.

"Go—to—the—devil! Understand, once for all, that you get no hush-money out of me, by whatever name you call it. If you've got anything to tell about me, tell it and be damned. I'm not buying anybody's silence. I don't want silence. If the people are going to send me to the Senate, I want them to know the truth about me first—the plain truth, and all the truth. Can't I make you idiots understand that? Can't you get it out of your heads that I'm running some sort of a confidence game? There's enough in my past that I wish wasn't there, God knows; but I'm not going to hide it. The people have a right to know

who I am and what I've done. If anybody wants to know the facts, let him come to me and I'll give them to him, without any 'ifs' or 'ands' or 'buts.' Buy your silence! If I could buy fellows like you to silence at five cents a dozen, I'd keep my nickel. Hear?"

There was the murmur of a low-voiced response, which Watson cut short.

"Bronson! Oh, Bronson! He's back of it, is he? I thought so. I knew he'd show himself sooner or later. I knew he couldn't keep up even an outward show of decency for more than two weeks at a time. That nasty little half-breed comes of two races of traitors; what could any one expect of him but treachery? If to keep faith would serve his ends better, he'd still choose the part of the betrayer; he couldn't help it. There hasn't been any political scoundrelism worth mentioning in Omaha for the last twenty years but that he's been at the bottom of it. You go and tell him I said so. Bronson! If I could buy him and all his imps to silence at five cents a million, it would be an extravagance. I wouldn't have his silence at any price. I despise him. Tell him I said that, too. I'll make no compromise with him, if it would give me the place for life. Now you get out of here, and stay out."

He flung open the middle door. "Boughton," he flashed, "go out there and sit in my chair for a while, and let me have yours. Don't let anybody

bother me about anything till I get ready to come out. I want to be let alone."

For a time David heard his laboring tread crossing and recrossing the narrow limits of the inner room, in a brave effort to walk down his temper. Then followed two hours of unbroken silence beyond the closed door. Noon came—one o'clock; still there was no sign from within. The office gathered its accustomed multitude—a multitude in numbers, but a wearisome unit in type and motive. David held these folk at bay as best he could, with the plea that Watson was engaged. Most of them hung about, on that word, waiting, and more came in to help them wait, until the rooms were close with stale smells, thick with smoke of cheap tobacco, buzzing with subdued talk in corners between confederates in some cunning plot. It was plain enough that one instinct ruled the common mind—distrust. The breast of practical politics yields none but that unwholesome milk to its sucklings. In other conditions of life some of these faces would have been good enough, with their firm features and a certain latent capacity for expressing frank, human emotions; but sly craft and hungry watchfulness had pencilled out the softer lines, making the faces into stolid masks, expressive of nothing above the mental level of the fox.

David tried at first to go on with his reading, but that became impossible, and he gave it up and laid his book aside as one of the loiterers—an ill-

clad young Irishman, whose old coat was buttoned high to conceal his soiled shirt-front — perched upon a corner of the desk, drumming with his heavy, muddy heels on the polished mahogany. The fellow had an instinct for friendliness, or for an ostentatious counterfeit of it, and seemed to think David worth cultivating.

"He's a great man, Watson is, ain't he? Have you knowed him long?"

"Only a few weeks."

"I been knowin' him ten year — an' I don't know him yet. Watson's deep, he is. You never know how to take him. A man that don't drink— how's anybody to know what he will do?" He fetched a soiled tobacco-pouch from his pocket and began fashioning a cigarette between his pudgy fingers. When it was finished he scratched a match on the desk-top and sucked his lungs full of the pungent smoke, allowing it to escape slowly from lips and nostrils while he talked. "D' ye ever hear about the time he quit drinkin'? 'Twas the funniest thing I ever seen in my days."

"I didn't know he'd ever been a drinker," David said.

"Oh, Lord! Used to drink like a sand-bank, five or six year ago. Just after his wife run off with Curran, there was a whole year when he set the high mark for all the drinkers in Omaha. French brandy—I've seen him drink a pint of it without turnin' away from the bar. The funniest thing was you never could see he was drunk, not a

little bit. You know there is them that don't show it, even when they're full up to the neck. *I* ain't that kind. Sure as I get three or four little whiskeys in me somebody's got to ring for the patrol, an' then I got to cough up to the police clerk next mornin'. That makes drinkin' too damned expensive for a poor man. I can't afford it to get full more 'n oncet a month. An' there was Watson, that could afford to pay the fines, he could take his pint o' brandy on board an' you'd never know it, except for his eyes. He'd walk home steady an' straight as a funeral. I tell you, it don't look like things was evened up very well in this world, does it? An' then, just to think, *he* was the one that quit! He didn't know a good thing when he had it. It was sure funny, though. There was a bunch of us down in Dougherty's place one night, 'long about 'leven, an' he came in an' stood up against the bar an' called for his brandy. He drunk five or six of 'em, right in a string; an' then he took the bottle an' went over an' set down to a table, right in front o' the big plate lookin'-glass they had there, an' poured him out another one an' drunk it, lookin' at himself in the glass. After he'd got it down, he set there a minute, with his elbows on the table, lookin' at himself; an' then he took up the bottle, holdin' it up to his nose, smellin' it an' shakin' it, an' keepin' on lookin' at himself in the glass, solemn as a horse. You'd 've died, it was so comical! After a bit he just reached over an' ketched up a big brass

spittoon that was settin' on the floor, an' he hauled off an' threw it right plumb through the lookin'-glass, an' smashed it all to hell. He just turned 'round an' walked over to the bar, an' he says to the bar-keep', 'You tell Dougherty to send the bill for damages to me in the mornin'.' He walked out, an' he ain't touched a drop o' nothin' since. Just quit! Don't that kill you? Oh, I tell you, he's a deep one!"

By the middle of the afternoon the less hardy ones of the crowd abandoned their watch and went listlessly away; but it was near the dinner hour when the room was finally cleared. Still there was only silence beyond Watson's door. David had missed his lunch—a thing he was not used to doing—and his stomach yearned. After the last man had taken his way down the echoing corridor, David went in for his coat and hat.

Watson sat by the window, lolling back in his chair, his huge legs cocked upon the desk-top, a much-read copy of *Middlemarch* lying open in his lap. He looked up, quaking with quiet laughter.

"Oh, I'm having a bully time!" he cried, his voice ringing like a boy's. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years. By ginger, I do like George Eliot! She's so astonishingly prodigal with her good things. Why, the very best things in this story are tucked away in the obscurest corners of out-of-the-way paragraphs, where you'd never think of looking for them. I don't see how

she could afford to be so reckless. If I were a writer, I'd do differently. I'd save up all the witty things to begin chapters with, where they'd make a show. But she doesn't seem to care whether anybody sees them or not. She's a regular spendthrift."

He slammed the book shut and threw it on the desk, then stretched his arms over his head, yawning.

"Another day gone, thank the Lord! Whatever's in store for us is so much nearer. Come on, let's get a little dinner somewhere, just by ourselves, and then go to the theatre. What do you say? There's a delicious bit of comedy on, this week, over at Boyd's."

XV

EVENING was settling as they went out. It was not yet dusk, but there was a softening of the robust afternoon light, an assembling of shadows in the corners of the halls. The incandescent globes were glowing feebly. Many of the tenants of the building were locking their doors and starting homeward; the janitors were asserting themselves, hurrying with their nightly work. The elevators were crowded, and the crowd thickened in the rotunda to a dense throng.

There was excitement of some sort afoot. The broad stone steps leading down to the street were packed with men squeezed together, those on the outside stretching on tiptoe, craning their necks trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on in the entry, where voices were rising in a swirl of passionate altercation.

"What's the matter here?" Watson demanded, elbowing the lesser folk aside and pushing his way towards the centre of difficulty. Recognizing him, the crowd opened a way for him. A voice sang out above the clamor, "Here's Watson now!" and the cry was taken up by other voices. Then the crowd closed together in a breathless jam.

"Yes, here I am!" Watson challenged. "What's up? If it's anything of mine, give me a hand in it."

The man Bronson stood at the side of one of the steps, his back planted against a pillar, his arms swinging above his head, his voice lifted in a fury of declamation. His face was livid with anger, the muscles distorted, gnarled; his hat was gone; his hair was tangled and blown about his forehead. Before him, facing him, the object of his violent wrath, stood a decrepit old man, leaning heavily upon a stout cane. His figure was patriarchal, venerable; it suggested that almost angelic dignity which descends upon very old men towards the last. But his face was in odd contrast to that suggestion; his wrinkled cheeks were flushing with sardonic satisfaction in having provoked Bronson's theatrical outburst; his rheumy old eyes were flashing. He was enjoying himself thoroughly, tasting again the almost forgotten savor of conflict.

"What's all this about?" Watson repeated. He laid his hand, not unkindly, upon the old man's shoulder. "What are you doing, Martin? This is no business for you."

The ancient straightened his bent form slightly, laughing in a weak, plaintive falsetto. "You let me alone. I'm just amusin' the boys a little, pokin' up the pup to hear him yelp. If you want some fun, you stand there an' listen a minute. He's just peelin' the wrapper off a fresh bundle o'

dif'rent colored cuss-words. He's talkin' about you, too. It ought to be mighty interestin' for you."

"Oh, come away!" Watson growled. "A man of your sense has no business messing with such offal; the smell will stick to you for days."

Bronson sprang suddenly forward, shaking his closed fist in Watson's face, lifting his voice in an inarticulate scream. He was quite beside himself.

"Wow-wow!" the old man cried, in shrill taunt. "Just listen! Anybody 'd think to hear him that the little mongrel was 'most ready to bite." He turned, grinning, towards the nearer members of the crowd, who had drawn back a little in alarm. "Don't get scairt, boys; I won't let him hurt you." He faced Watson, licking his tongue over his shrivelled lips. "Somebody's been tellin' him somethin' you said about him to-day, an' seems like it's kind o' disagreed with him. I just been tellin' him what I think about him, too, an' he don't seem to like that no better. He's awful hard to please, ain't he? I said as many dif'rent things as I could think of, too, so's to give him a chance to take his pick."

"Oh, somebody take this doddering old grandmother away!" Bronson cried. "This is business for men."

"Men!" the old fellow echoed, in his thin treble. "Who's called *you* a man? You'd have a thunderin' hard time provin' it. All you've got to show for your manhood is the poor girls you've

ruined, an' the bastard children you've got hid away in asylums. Don't you talk to me about *men!*"

In a frenzy Bronson raised his arm and struck the old man heavily in the face. He swung half around under the blow, trying to steady himself upon his cane, clutching at the air. His foot slipped on the stone, and before any could prevent he fell backward at full length, his head striking with violence against the edge of a step.

For a moment no one moved. The fallen man lay without stirring, save for a convulsive drawing-up of the legs. His face was upturned, colorless. A small pool of blood formed beneath his head, staining his silvery hair and trickling slowly over the edge of the step to the one below.

Watson was the first to recover. His big hand caught Bronson's collar, forcing him back against the wall.

"You infamous coward!" he roared. Bronson's hand went to his hip, but Watson's mighty grasp tightened like steel on his wrist, and the bone snapped.

"Call an officer!" Watson shouted. "Get a doctor here, somebody. Lift Martin up, can't you? What are you gaping at, you dolts?"

David knelt on the steps, raising the old head to his knee.

"Let me through!" a voice demanded, sharply, and a man knelt beside the body, examining it with deft, professional manner.

"HIS BIG HAND CAUGHT BRONSON'S COLLAR"

"Dead," he said, simply. "You'd better get an ambulance. The police surgeon ought to see him, too, to prevent question. He's dead, though —killed instantly."

Terror seized upon Bronson, making him oblivious to the pain in his broken wrist. "Good God, no!" he chattered. "He can't be dead! Get another doctor, quick, for God's sake! Let go of me, Watson. Let *me* see him. Of course he's not dead. Men don't die as easy as that."

"This one did," the physician said, curtly. "He's dead enough. There was concussion at the base of the brain, with instant paralysis."

A police officer and a deputy from the sheriff's office ran in together from the street and relieved Watson of his shivering charge, hurrying him away, some of the spectators trailing along behind, aimlessly expectant. The police patrol came up at a gallop, and the alert young surgeon gave the body a swift inspection. There seemed to be a concert of intention to have the incident over with as soon as possible.

"He's dead, all right," the surgeon said. "The coroner's the man you want now. You'd better take him down in our ambulance, and not wait for them to come after him."

The body was lifted into the black wagon, and Watson climbed in beside it.

"Come on, Boughton," he urged. "I must look after him, and I'll need your help." On the way down street he bent over the dead figure, straight-

ening the poor old legs and arms with an ineffectual tenderness.

"Oh, it's tough," he lamented, gloomily. "Poor old soul! A better fellow never lived on earth. And to die in that way, under the hand of that unspeakable scoundrel! He thought he was serving me, too." He looked across at David with eyes full of dismay. "I feel as though it's on my head. I knew when I went into it that there was some hideous thing lying in wait for me behind it all."

They left the body with the coroner, Watson giving directions for its care. Then they came out to the street again, and Watson laid his hand heavily upon David's arm.

"We'll have to go and see his wife," he said, in growing anguish of mind. "There were just those two, grown old together. By God, it's cruel! It 'll kill her, too, most likely. They depended on each other like children. I'd give all I've got if I didn't have to go; but she'd better hear it from some one of sense. I hope no bungler has got there ahead of us. You'll have to stand by me, Boughton, and see me through. I can't do it alone."

It was quite dark. They went to a remote corner of the city — a quiet cross street where small cottages stood in close rows. Evidently the neighborhood was known to Watson; he went directly to one of the houses, passed around by the narrow, creaking plank-walk to the kitchen, and rapped at the door. A little dog within started a

furious yap-yapping in the thin, rasping voice of canine senility. A woman spoke in reproof, then came slowly forward and opened the door.

She was a shadowy, little, old creature, with just enough of substance left upon her bones to hold a flickering spark of vitality. Her dress, though scanty to the lowest point of plainness, hung loosely from her lean shoulders; her eyes, behind big, steel-framed spectacles, shone but feebly.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"You'd never guess," Watson answered, with a deep-toned laugh—a brave assumption of cheer. The woman started in pleased surprise.

"Why, Paul!" she cried, holding her weazened, tremulous hands towards him. "Why, what in the world brings you here?" She took his big hand between her own, drawing him inside, clinging to him still, patting his arm, leaning upon him with what seemed an excess of feeling. "It's awful good of you to come; but you oughtn't to put yourself out to do it, when I know how terrible busy you've been. Oncet a month is as often as we ought to expect you to come away out here, just to see a couple o' old folks like we be." She caught sight of David then, and regarded him with a pathetic, half-blind stare. "Oh, you've brought some one with you."

"Yes. This is Mr. Boughton, Mrs. Akin. He's a friend of mine—a pretty good sort of a boy. You'll have to make a place in your heart for him, too, as you've done with me."

She gave David a nervous, embarrassed hand-clasp. "I guess I can, if you say so, Paul," she said, with a quavering laugh. "Anybody you like 's got a place in my heart a'ready, though, without no askin'. Set down, won't you, by the stove, an' get you warmed up. These nights is gettin' pretty chilly after dark; though I 'ain't hardly ever seen such a fine fall as this has been, not since we first come acrost the Missouri. That's forty-three year ago yeste'd'y. Yes, sir. Me an' Martin was settin' at the supper-table last night, an' it came to me all of a sudden what day it was. I couldn't hardly believe it, how long it had been, when I come to think back over it. Martin said it seemed twicet as long to him, but it don't to me. I believe the older I get the shorter it seems. I went an' opened up a can o' them peaches you sent me, to kind o' celebrate; an' after supper Mart he set here an' smoked one o' your cigars, an' we didn't go to bed till after ten o'clock, talkin' about old times. He hadn't ought to smoked it, though, that near bedtime, because he didn't sleep none to speak of till pretty near mornin'; an' he kep' me awake, too, with his thrashin' 'round. But I guess mebbe 't wa'n't all the cigar that done it. It's got so, lately, he gets all stirred up every time he starts to talkin' about the days he was young. I tell him I b'lieve he's gettin' foolish over it."

She had placed a couple of chairs for them, and, while she went on with her cheery, inconsequent

recital, had turned her attention to the little cook-stove, whose top held a bubbling teakettle and stewpan. Her age sat lightly upon her spirit, though it had worked havoc with her body. She was happily contented.

XVI

THE kitchen of the Akin home was narrow and low, and altogether tiny, though there was plenty of space for the few simple furnishings. A cheap pine cupboard stood in one corner; a pine table, covered with a square of red oil-cloth, was over against the wall, set ready for supper, a small, flat-wicked oil-lamp gleaming faintly upon the slight array of coarse crockery. The floor was bare save that back of the stove a braided rug was spread for the comfort of the dog—an ugly pug, bloated with years. That was all, excepting those bravely conventional attempts at decoration which poverty is wont to indulge when it sets about making a home for itself—a canary chirping sleepily in its diminutive prison, two or three stunted geraniums in tin cans on the window-shelf, and a various collection of colored pictures, cut from the literature of the grocer and the butcher, fastened up with pins here and there about the cracked plastering.

"I'll just make an extry cup o' tea," the woman said, briskly. "You'll stay an' help me an' Mart drink it, won't you? Mart hasn't come home yet to-night, but he ought to be here by the time

I get things ready. I can't think what's keepin' him. If there's one thing he's usu'ly particular about, it's gettin' home in time for supper. You just take your coats off an' let me lay 'em in on the bed, an' then wait a bit. I s'pose mebbe you wanted to see Mart, anyway, didn't you?"

Watson got to his feet with a mighty sigh, walking around the little stove and standing by her side, laying his arm over her drooping shoulders. "No, Mrs. Akin, we didn't come to see Mart. We came to see you alone, this time." He faltered, looking down at her with infinite compassion. "You've always had the courage of a dozen men in facing things. You must keep it now. We don't bring you very good news, dear old heart."

"Oh!" she breathed. She drew back from him a little, putting up her shaking hands to set her spectacles straight upon her nose, then looking earnestly into his face. "It's something about Mart, ain't it? Something's happened to him. Tell me. Is he sick, or hurt?"

"He was hurt," Watson answered, with heavy reluctance. "Yes, he was very badly hurt. But it's all over now, and all right. I know you'll say so. I know what your faith is." He stretched out his arms and took her in their clasp, holding her gray old head against his burly breast. Tears sprang to David's sympathetic eyes, but Watson's feeling was deeper; his eyes were dry, his voice without a tremor. "He didn't know a moment's

suffering. If your love could have chosen the way, you couldn't have given him less pain than he felt. It was all over in a moment."

It sounded almost brutally blunt and hard. At the best, no matter what their tact or grace or tenderness of tongue or intention, messengers who bear such tidings have no easy task. News of death is not to be much softened by the little subtleties of the intellect. The plain, simple word is as good as any delicate contrivance.

She lay quite still for a moment in his arms, her face hidden; then she released herself gently. They might have spared themselves the dread of racking demonstration; there was no outcry, no spectacular grief. She lifted her hands and smoothed some straggling ends of hair back from her forehead. Upon a careful, subconscious impulse of housewifery, she moved the steaming stewpan to the back of the stove and closed a damper, then stood with hands held together before her, puckering the hem of her apron between her knotted fingers, regarding the plaits intently. She did not appear stunned. Her busy, homely cares of a few minutes ago had come suddenly to a dead stop; that was all. She was looking at the fact with clear vision. A long, long sigh was her only show of emotion.

"Where is he?" she asked, presently, in undaunted quiet. "Were you with him, Paul?"

"Yes. We were both there, and we've done everything needful. There isn't anything any-

body can do now, except to care for you. You must let me do that, while we both live. I can't take his place, of course, but you must let me do what I can. You mustn't be anxious. I'll take care of you. I'll—" He turned away before the look she gave him and crossed to the window, staring out into the night, his big body shaking. "God!" he cried. "I can't see why things happen so!"

"Paul! Paul!" she said. "You mustn't talk that way." She was at his side, clutching his arm, holding fast to him. "Listen to me a minute. I'm not grievin'. God knows best, Paul. I've been wonderin' an' wonderin', ever since he had his last spell, if it wasn't 'most time for him to go. His work was all done in this world years ago, an' he was just kind o' waitin' to hear the word, same as I be. He was all ready, any time. When a body's old, like us, an' can't do no more, why, death's God's mercy to 'em. It's *meant* that way; don't you see? I don't say I won't miss him; I been so used to his ways, an' gettin' his meals for him, an' helpin' him on with his shoes in the mornin'— Oh, I will miss him dreadful; I will, I *will!*" She bent her head against his shoulder in a spasm of acute suffering; but in a moment her patient eyes were raised again to his. "Can't you see it's best? We wouldn't never 've *wished* him dead, not if he'd lived a hundred years yet; but now it's happened, I'm not goin' to think o' nothin' except

what a blessin' it is to him to be red of his neuralgy an' his crippled leg an' all like that. I ain't sorry for him; it's only myself I'm sorry for, an' I 'ain't got no business to be that. It ain't a shock, like it would 've been when we was young. I been expectin' it. There 'ain't been a night this last year but I've gone to sleep wonderin' if we'd both wake up in the mornin', an' kind o' surprised when we did. It's all right, Paul. It's a blessin' he was the one to go first, because he couldn't have got along nohow alone, like I can. It won't be very long. I'll go, too, one o' these days pretty soon, an' then we'll both be together again."

"God bless you!" Watson cried. "I sha'n't make a fool of myself trying to comfort a faith like yours. You don't need comfort. But you've got to let me look after you—like a son. I'll be a son to you."

"You've been better to us than our own son ever was," she answered, simply. "I'm not goin' to be proud with you, an' say no. I won't need much; but I'm goin' to let you give it to me, just like you been doin', as long as you feel like it."

The news had reached the neighborhood at last, and some women came in from the cottages near by, full of beautiful human kindness and sympathy. Some, true to the one sure impulse of the lowly in such hours—the impulse to give—brought modest offerings of delicacies from their own stores at home. The kitchen filled with those good,

hearty, homely souls; they overwhelmed the old widow with the numberless, nameless little offices which only the women of that rank know; they wept over her; they stood around, talking together in garrulous over-cheerfulness, as if that would exorcise sorrow.

Mrs. Akin seemed in small need of ministration. She sat in her rocking-chair beside the stove, her hands folded in her lap, hearing and seeing what was going on, but heeding only her own deep, tranquil thoughts. Her wrinkled old face was transfigured, glorified by its perfect peace.

Watson spoke quietly to David. "We'd better go. We don't belong here now. She'll be taken care of better than we could do it. Let's get out. I'll come up again in the morning."

They slipped away and returned towards the heart of the city.

XVII

ALTHOUGH it was eleven o'clock, the downtown streets were full of men. Watson and David left the electric-car at Sixteenth and Farnam. There was a crowd at the corner, moving westward, and people were hurrying in from all the side streets. They were orderly enough. There was no boisterous confusion; only the steady, shuffling drift of feet up the hill. There was no excited outcry; only a strong, bass hum of many voices.

Watson stopped at the curb, looking quickly around. "Heavens and earth!" he said, in a deep undertone. "Here's a mess!"

"What's the matter?" David asked.

"Look!" Watson returned. He pointed westward. A block away, at the intersection of Seventeenth Street, the flowing crowd had met an obstruction. The arc-lamps, swinging overhead, revealed many thousands of men closely jammed, congested in the wide street, packing the space between the court-house wall and the opposite buildings. At that distance the eye could see nothing individual; there was only a broad, swelling surge of the mass, now backward, now forward,

under constantly changing impulse or direction. The ear could catch only one dominant note—the heavy roar of one voice, sullen, ominous—the roar of a tumbling surf of passion. The court-house yard, with its steep, sodded terraces, was cleared; but at intervals on the long flights of steps groups of police officers were stationed, the metal stars on their breasts glinting.

"What is it?" David persisted. His inexperience left him far short of realizing what was afoot; but he felt an indescribable thrill, that was half terror and half exultation.

"Don't you know?" Watson cried. "They're after *him!*"

"You mean—"

"I mean Bronson, God damn him!"

The common impulse had taken hold upon them; unthinkingly they had fallen into step with the rest, and were pushing their way excitedly towards the point above, where the heart of the movement was throbbing, sending abroad hot, pulsing waves of feeling. The sidewalks were too narrow; the throng had spread out to the pavement, choking it from centre to curb. The car-line was blockaded; a half-dozen cars stood in line below Seventeenth Street, and in the lower block was another string.

Watson seemed possessed; his great body was alive to its outmost fibre. "Keep close to me!" he called to David, and with savage strength he crowded and fought his way onward, crushing op-

position. Once thoroughly aroused, he was not to be held back. In the thickest of the mob, where the efforts of other men were impotent, he threw his ponderous weight against the mass, breaking it apart and going through. David had all he could do to keep up. Now he was borne almost to his knees, then lifted fairly from his feet; but his own muscular strength was great, and at last he stood, breathless and shaking, by Watson's side, leaning against the stone wall below the court-house.

A police captain with a squad of men blocked the foot of the stairway near by. Those below were swinging their clubs threateningly against the front rank of the crowd, as it was unwillingly borne forward by the ungovernable pressure from the rear; those above stood ready for emergency, armed with heavy revolvers.

When he had recovered his breath, Watson went closer. "Let us through, Mike," he called to the captain. The officer recognized him and spoke a quiet word to his men; way was made for them to pass, the squad closing again after them.

Watson spoke to one of the rear rank. "Has anything happened yet?"

"No," the man answered, "nor I don't believe it will. There's nobody at the head. They ain't goin' to do nothin' this way. They'll get tired an' cold pretty soon, an' go home. There 'ain't been a sign o' trouble."

"What has the sheriff done?"

"Oh, he's back in the jail with his own men, an' he's got a few extra deputies pressed in. Everything's been quiet around there. We've kept the yard clear. We'll get the crowd to movin' after a while. The chief's sent out for the day-men to come down an' help. After we once get 'em movin', it 'll be all over in an hour or two. You can see by lookin' at 'em they ain't out for blood."

In truth, there was little of blood-thirsty ferocity appearing on those upturned faces. Standing apart and looking at them from above, they seemed dull rather than savage; they were merely gaping with curiosity. The only token they gave of great portent was that deep-throated snarl—a note that rang from an elemental chord in the soul of the multitude. Personal identity was engulfed in the breadth of sound. No single voice had that ring; yet it swelled, resonant, terrible, above the mingled cries of the many, as the voice of the demon that moved them. None can understand who has not heard. As David listened to it, it beat upon his ears with a sickening significance. It was as lawless, as far beyond methodical control, as the roll of thunder on some wild night of prairie storm. The terror was not in the sound itself, but in the nameless feeling it bred in the heart of him who heard. Thousands of men do not meet in perfect sympathy on a common plane, unless it be a plane very low in the scale of emotion. These thousands were as one. There was the threat, the danger. What if they should

make up their minds to kill? The spirit of law and order, represented in those little knots of bluecoats, appeared so paltry, so wholly ineffective, against the potential strength of that vast horde.

Watson led the way to the pillared porch above, where a dozen men, leaders like himself in the public life of the city, were assembled, waiting, talking quietly together. They met him as though his coming was welcome—as though they got comfort and support from his sturdy, masterful presence. They were men strongly set apart from the mob below; they were of that class, always small in numbers but great in power, which gives dignity and poise and safety to the life of a community; men in whom the old, old idea of integrity rises always and forever superior to that inextricable tangle of twisted and broken threads of motive that actuates the people. They were all past middle life, past the danger of easy disturbance of mind and soul. Outwardly they appeared almost unmoved by the dramatic fervor of the spectacle being enacted under their eyes; more than once a low laugh went around, in sympathy with a whimsical or witty word from one or another of their number; but under it all lay a deep, far-reaching sense of human obligation—obligation alike for the turbulent thousands and for the one poor wretch who cowered in his cell at the back of the yard, listening to the merciless, hungry clamor that was making the air vibrant.

"Well, Watson," one of these men said, in greet-

ing, "you've managed to put quite a little show on the boards to-night. I believe they say you're the stage-manager."

"It's most deadly true, God forgive me!" Watson answered, with an earnestness that put an instant check upon the other's jest. He seated himself wearily upon the topmost step, his elbows on his knees, his chin supported in his hands, his gloomy eyes wandering slowly over the face of the billowing human sea.

"I wonder why the Almighty doesn't give us a little foresight," he said. "Just a little—just enough to let us avert these awful and useless catastrophes. It would have taken so little foreknowledge to prevent this murder to-night. When a thing's past, like this, we get a sense of responsibility that's fairly benumbing; but what good does that do?"

Before any tried to answer there was a diversion in the street. Something had happened, unseen from above, exciting the crowd to laughter. The laugh went flickering over the surface of that ominous, persistent hum like the shimmer of moonlight over the ruffled bosom of dark waters; there was an effect in it like a cold shiver. One of the onlookers spoke.

"There's no getting at the heart of a mob like that. There's absolutely no telling what it will do or won't do under a mighty little provocation. They're ready to laugh or kill, just according to how the notion strikes them; and they don't

much care which comes first. Individually, they're sane enough; but get a few hundred of them together in a crowd and start some sort of a wild cry, and they'll go clean back at one jump to naked savagery. You'd think the human race would have outgrown that sort of folly by this time."

"Oh, pshaw!" Watson blurted. "Men don't change. Conditions change, and dam up the currents of behavior once in a while; but men are at heart just the same now as they were in the beginning. What makes the book of Genesis so fascinating to us? It's because we know exactly how those old roosters felt, in every particular of their lives. We haven't changed a bit. Eating and drinking and breeding and loving and hating are just exactly the same now as then. We've built up a glittering system of ethics, and we've tabulated our morals, and all that sort of thing; but strip away the rubbish and you'll find the old, primal man. I've known the time myself when I was almost ready to go out on the prairie and smear paint on my face and eat raw liver."

An old man who lounged lightly against the porch-rail spoke mildly. "A little excessive, my friend. We're not altogether wise; but we're growing wiser."

"I don't believe it," Watson retorted, stoutly. "We're moving faster than they did two thousand years ago—we've quickened the pace of our

folly, that's all. We do the same old, mad things in half the time, and brag about the advance of civilization. I tell you, those fellows down there aren't a whit less plastic under the hands of a born manipulator of men than the children of Israel were. A born leader can take a mob at any time and do what he likes with it. It doesn't matter whether he's a sage or a charlatan, so long as he knows how to play on the few simple strings that make human nature. If he can do that, he can make them follow like sheep in the direction of his own ruling passion."

The crowd had suddenly quickened into new movement. A commotion had started at the western side of the square, around the corner, out of sight from the porch, and the populace was drifting strongly in that direction. There was a new sound in its cry; the deep bass growl was broken into a strident, high-pitched yell, filling the street with shrill echoes.

"Something's doing!" one of the spectators called out. "They've started a fight, likely, or else they've run against the police."

It was more than that. From the alley opening into Eighteenth Street, opposite the jail, a score of men had burst, running in a compact wedge, forcing a way for themselves. They wore cloth masks over their faces, and were heavily armed with sledges and crow-bars; and supported on a half-dozen shoulders were two lengths of railroad iron. They were few in number, but

they were more potent than the gaping thousands, for they had a purpose. They made no noise, but their grim silence was a greater menace than all the inarticulate babel that swelled around them.

The attack was well timed. The steep driveway that led up to the jail was defended at its mouth by a detachment of police, armed like the rest, and formidable in fighting strength; but through several hours they had been occupied with nothing graver than the fretting work of holding in check a good-natured rabble. They had given up the idea of serious trouble, and had relaxed their earlier vigilance. The sudden, determined rush of this score of men came with the shock of complete surprise. The crowd opened its ranks before the energetic charge and let them come into sharp contact with the police. The weary sergeant in command hesitated for a fateful instant; before he recovered his wits the maskers had thrown themselves heavily against the line of defence, crumpling it, sweeping it aside. The eager host closed after them, following in their steps, delirious now with excitement. Within a dozen seconds the leaders were at the jail doors, and the spaces around were choked full of shrieking rioters. The guards at the other entrances left their posts, running up to lend aid, and the crowds on all sides of the square, now quite unrestrained, poured in by every avenue. Over their outcry sounded the first strong blows of the sledges against the outer doors

of the jail, swung by powerful arms. The police could do nothing; they were tossed about like drift in a swirling eddy, hatless, struggling, spent, impotent. They became no more effectual for order than so many women; they were merely units in the multitude, and must await its will.

Watson dragged David to a place on the rear steps of the court-house, whence a view could be had of what was going on. A gigantic fellow, stripped of his coat, his grimy arms bared to the elbows, his shoulders knotted with thick welts of muscle, stood foremost in the group of masked leaders, swinging a hammer with mighty strength. The door had not been built to resist such assault from without; already the blows were showing effect. The man knew where to strike, and iron and wood alike were splintering and giving way. It was only a matter of a few minutes of such work until the outer door would be passed.

"They'll get him, sure!" Watson shouted above the turmoil. "There'll be one more devil in hell before morning, thank God!" He was intoxicated by passion; the veins on his sweating forehead were swollen with blood, standing out in purple cords; his eyes glittered; his lips were convulsed by a savage laugh.

A window opened in the upper story of the jail, and a bearded man leaned out, calling to those below with emphatic gestures, shaking a big revolver in his hand. His words were unheeded, unheard. The crowd broke into a cheer,

and another man joined the giant who swung the sledge, adding the din of a second hammer.

"That's the sheriff!" Watson cried. "He's got his men inside. They'll have him to deal with before they get to the cells, and it won't be child's play. He'll fight as long as there's any fight left in him. He'll shoot to kill, too. They've got a man to reckon with there."

A wilder cheer went up. One of the heavy hinges had broken at last, and the door was tilting outward at the top. The sheriff ceased his efforts and retired within, closing the window.

Watson pulled at David's sleeve. "Come on," he said. "We'll go home now. I don't want to see the rest; do you?"

David had been for an hour like a man held by the horror of nightmare, his mind asleep, except for the power to see and hear. Understanding had been dulled by an abnormal fixedness of attention on the rushing procession of facts. He had hardly spoken; he had merely looked and listened. But now he felt the blood rush into his brain, and his mind started broad awake in a flash.

"Watson!" he cried. "In Heaven's name, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing!" Watson answered, roughly. "There's nothing for us to do. It isn't our funeral." He laughed aloud in barbaric relish. "This is one of the functions of the great Amer-

ican people, Boughton. They're administering government. I'm going home to bed, and you'd better come, too. They'll look after the little details, and we can read about it in the morning. Come on."

"No!" David screamed, in an ecstasy of excitement. "Watson! What are you thinking of? Is that your idea of law?"

"Oh! Law!" Watson returned, with the same bitter laugh. "The law has just fallen back for an hour or so into the hands of the people who made it — that's all. What's the difference? They'll do a quick job, and they'll save him and everybody else months of useless worry. It 'll come to the same thing in the end, if justice doesn't miscarry. We can't do anything, anyway."

"We can *try!* Good God, we can *try!*" David caught Watson by one massive shoulder, shaking it in a fury of protest. "Watson! Man! If justice means anything at all, it doesn't mean *that!* What's got into you? They'll kill him! There's not a man lifting a hand to stop it. They'll kill him, I tell you!"

Watson's figure was immovable, granitic in its absolute impassivity.

"Kill him, will they? Well, let 'em! He's earned killing, if ever a man did in this world." He held his clinched fists above his head, shaking them in a frenzy towards the jail. "I'd not hold up one finger to save him from any doom they

could hatch for him. I hate him! I hate him! —hate him!—hate him!"

David grew hot with quick anger, the flaming indignation which does not measure its words. "Stay here, then!" he cried. "I'm going down." It was the spirit of the citizen that was aroused in him now—the spirit of the protestant against unbridled force in antagonism to law. He did not know what he would try to do, more than to set his will somehow against that of the rioters; he did not stop to consider how much alone he would be in the effort, unknown as he was; it did not occur to him to appeal for aid to those around him. He sprang down the steps and into the crowd, struggling resolutely towards the jail door. It was no time for gentle manners; he used the utmost strength of his sinewy legs and heavy-muscled shoulders, setting his teeth together in grim silence, battling for every foot of the way. The crowd resented his rough vigor, swearing at him and opposing his every step with harshness. His coat was split from collar to waist; his hat was crushed over his eyes; despite the chill of the air, his face dripped with perspiration and his deep lungs gasped for breath. A drunken fellow, unsteady on his legs, struck out savagely with a bony fist, catching David on the cheek and bringing a spurt of blood; his hat fell off and was trampled under foot. Still he kept on, fighting, panting. At last he came to the steps, where the leaders were at work.

The giant with the sledge had made good use of the time, swinging his weapon with muscles tireless as steel, his blows regular as pulses. Both hinges were broken now, and the door hung tottering, supported only by its bolts. The mob was gathering closer, shrieking insanely, making ready for the next decisive move in the game. The great hammer fell with a ringing stroke and was lifted again. David leaped forward and stood upon the steps, facing the worker, catching one brawny wrist in both hands and throwing all his weight against it, so that the descending sledge swept out sidewise in a wide arc, its force impotently spent.

"Stop!" he cried. He set his back against the swaying door, bracing his feet on the stone steps, squaring his shoulders for the struggle which he knew must come.

For a moment there was a perplexed pause. The fallen hammer hung idle, and the menacing scream of the crowd, tense an instant before, was modulated into a futile, surprised babble. David had appeared without warning; his audacious, single-handed interference and his distraught aspect seemed to break the current of purpose. His clothing was in wild disarray; his thick hair lay in a disordered mop over his forehead, clinging in damp strands to the skin; the blood from the wound on his cheek was clotted and smeared, and his collar and shirt were stained darkly by the fallen drops. The leader, embarrassed by his

hot mask of black cloth, tore it from his face and threw it upon the stones, then drew his thick, hairy arm slowly across his face, wet with sweat. But this suspense lasted for only a few seconds—just long enough to allow two or three deep, gasping breaths; then the giant stooped, grasped the stout handle of his weapon in both hands, and swung it high over his head, taking a step forward, his eyes blazing with wrath, his convulsed lips forming a ragged oath.

"Get out of the way, or I'll brain you!" he shouted. David saw the powerful muscles swelling for the blow and heard the excited scream of the onlookers, shrill with impatience over the delay. But he would not move aside; a desperate, unreasoning determination was upon him to stand where he was and to take what might come, even to death, rather than give way now. He raised his arms over his head in a lingering impulse of defence; he tried to speak, but his lips and tongue were parched dry; the seething mob, under the glare of the swinging electric lamps, became a wide, blurred blot before his eyes. Then, at the end of that breathless instant, a huge figure threw itself before him, confronting the enraged fellow with the hammer, breast to breast, and a thunderous voice bellowed above the clamor:

"Stop! Stand back! *Back*, I say! *Get back!*"

There was magic in it—the inexplicable magic of a mighty will. The packed mass fell away as before the levelled muzzles of arms, leaving a

broad, clear space on the flagged pavement; and in that space stood Watson, erect, burly, gigantic, his great shoulders heaving, his big face purple with passion.

"What are you doing?" he roared. "Drop that sledge, Stevens. *Drop it!*" He did not raise his hands; his fists hung clinched at his sides. He was fighting with his will alone—that and his terrible voice. But the heavy weapon fell with a clatter upon the stones, and the faces in the front rank of the rioters were blank with dismay. David, too, was dazed by the sharp shock of the unexpected; he stood with his back against the wall, a mere spectator now, listening curiously to Watson's booming cry.

"What are you trying to do?" Watson bellowed again. "You're a shame on the name of citizenship and manhood! I'm ashamed of *you*, Stevens —you brute fool—you anarchist—you outlaw! Is *this* the measure of your responsibility? Is this your sense of integrity? I'd always thought you a man! You're a disgrace to public decency! You're as much a criminal now as Bronson. If you had your deserts, you'd be sharing his cell with him." He stepped one long stride nearer the cowed giant, shaking a knotted fist in his face. "Lift your hand to this business again, if you dare, and I'll see that you get your just reward—you and all your pack—if it takes the last dollar I have on earth and the last drop of blood in my body! You attend to what I say. I'll make your life a

hell for you, till you'll be glad to quit it at the end of a rope!"

But the tension was too great to endure. Those farther back in the crowd, beyond the influence of this sturdy presence, failing to understand the sudden stoppage of the work upon which all had been so deeply intent a little time before, began another boisterous demonstration, their voices swelling again into one strong, deep-toned, ringing cry, and the front rank was pushed forward by an irresistible pressure. A stone, thrown by some impatient hand, flew in a wide arc over the thronged heads and fell with a sounding blow against the iron plates of the door; another missile struck one of the upper windows, and the shivered glass fell in a shower upon the stone steps beneath. Watson's great voice was hardly to be heard now over the rising tumult; only his huge body and his threatening attitude prevented an immediate renewal of the attack. But his intervention was enough. In those few moments a half-score of police had forced their way to the front, and now mounted the steps, their revolvers drawn; others were crowding forward, swinging their clubs lustily upon those who opposed their way. Suddenly a rifle-shot rang out from above, and the rioters turned their faces upward, startled into another brief interval of quiet. A stentorian voice shouted from the roof of the jail:

"I have twenty men up here, armed! The man in that crowd who dares take one step out of

that line towards the jail will be shot! You know me. I mean what I say!"

The little force of police, swelled by a few additions to their number who had succeeded in getting through the jam, moved forward determinedly, breasting the mob, threatening with club and pistol. The interruption had diverted the thoughts of the people for a time from their wild design; the leader had suffered defeat in his encounter with Watson, and no one offered to take his place. A mob without a leader is incapable of action. Slowly, stubbornly, sullenly, the line gave way, falling back upon itself. There was no longer a dominant, angry, single voice, but a confused jargon. The danger was over.

XVIII

DAVID awoke late, after a profound, dreamless sleep. The sun shone brilliantly through his wide-open windows, flooding the room with a white glare, and the air was jarring with the myriad noises of the day's activity on the paved streets, now in full flow. The unmistakable lateness of the hour confused him greatly, used as he was to rising at daybreak; for the moment his mind was a blank as to what had preceded sleep, but when he started briskly from his bed then every muscle of his body was wrung with pain, every strained nerve cried a protest, and he remembered. He sat down upon the edge of his bed, his elbows on his knees, his head supported in his hands, dwelling with intent appreciation upon the events of the last twenty-four hours as they disentangled themselves and fell into orderly procession for review. He got to his feet and took a stiff turn about the room, stretching his legs and arms and discovering the centres of tenderness. Then he broke into his irrepressible laugh.

"Well, son," he said, aloud, "you're getting a taste of high life now, aren't you? By ginger!

this certainly does beat farming for excitement. But I don't want it to happen every day. Thunder! how I do hurt!"

Sitting at his breakfast, he opened his morning paper. The front page was ominous with a big expanse of black head-lines. "Homicide, Horror, and Heroism!" ran the first, followed by a bold succession of others, in a gradually descending scale of blackness, setting forth a skeleton outline of the exciting story. "Splendid Coolness and Courage Prevent Ghastly Crime," said a lower line. "Mob Thwarted by Young Law Student. David Boughton, Hero." In the centre of the page was a group of three rough line portraits, one of the murdered man, one of the luckless Bronson, and the third, an audacious fiction of the zealous artist's imagination, bearing his own name.

David stared in utter amazement. Not once had it occurred to him that his escapade would entail notoriety; his mental habit was too spontaneous for that. For himself, he would have considered the whole thing but a spirited adventure, closed with the act and the night's sleep; yet here it was, hardily perpetuated to another day, thrust brazenly in upon his accustomed placid privacy. As he followed the turbulent narrative down the column, with its riotous superlatives, its sweeping disregard of anything like precision, its gross sensationalism, and, above all, its insistence upon the heroics of his own part in it, he tingled with

irritation. Watson's more effective achievement was made quite incidental to his own.

He left the table abruptly and hurried to the office. The door was locked, though it was now eleven o'clock. Within were the tidy signs of the little stenographer's attention to her morning duties, but her chair was empty. As he stood by the table, turning over a heap of the morning papers, each with its own recklessly graphic account of the night's happenings, she came in hurriedly, dressed as though from the street. When she saw him, her usually demure face flashed into a smile.

"Why, Mr. Boughton!" she cried. After an instant's hesitation she approached him with a shy offer of her small hand, her eyes alight. "I didn't think you'd be down to-day. Goodness! Wasn't it perfectly awful? But you've stood it a great deal better than Mr. Watson. He's sick in bed over it—just prostrated. He had me take his mail down to him, but he couldn't look at it when I got it there. He's all gone to pieces." She paused, looking up at him with modest shyness. "You must let me say it!" she cried, warmly. "It was just *splendid* in you!"

"Oh, please don't!" he begged.

He was suddenly sobered by her news. "I wonder if I oughtn't to go down? Maybe I can do something. I think I'll go and see, anyway. I'll come back again in a little while and help you run things. There'll be a lot to do, most

likely, with the politicians and all. I'll come back as soon as I can."

At the hotel he was shown to Watson's parlor, where he sat in waiting for many minutes. Watson's room adjoined the parlor, and through the closed door came a low, steady flow of voices—one, a heavy bass, going on and on in an excited monologue, with others putting in now and then a quieter sentence. As he listened, gradually the stress of the hurried voice grew less, with longer and longer breaks, sinking at last into silence. For ten minutes the silence continued unbroken; then the door was opened noiselessly and Margaret entered.

She was clad with extreme, almost rigorous, simplicity, in a loose morning-robe of creamy white, which draped her slender figure in long, sweeping lines from shoulder to foot, the lines only slightly broken at the waist by a corded girdle. A profusion of yellow lace encircled her throat and fell from her short sleeves over her round forearms. Her black hair was gathered lightly back from her forehead and lay upon her shoulders in two superb, lustrous braids, tied with bows of scarlet ribbon. There was a subtle, clear pallor in her dusky skin; but her lips, slightly parted over immaculate teeth, were brilliant as flame.

She paused at the threshold, closing the door with painstaking quiet, then turned and confronted David, who stood apart at the width of the

room. She did not speak, nor did he; but their glances met and held together. He stood quite still, waiting, while she came towards him with swift, light step, giving him both her hands. He took them in a firm clasp and held them. They were tremulous, and the tremor passed into his own strong fingers, along his muscled arms, and possessed the breadth of his sturdy body. Her wonderful eyes encountered his steadfastly, with no sign of weak confusion. No word passed between them. He stood looking down into her face—looking and looking, as though he would never get enough of it, thrilling with an unreasoning, delirious consciousness that in that instant he was wholly mastered, overborne, helpless, robbed of all volition by her radiant presence. He felt his heart leap, heard the warm, rushing blood singing in his brain, and saw that her bosom was troubled by the agitated indrawing of her breath.

"Your hands are—cold," he said, in a harsh whisper. Upon uncontrollable impulse he would have drawn her to him; but a startled light rose from the depths of her eyes, and she released herself with a quick, gasping murmur.

"No, no! Forgive me. I wanted to thank you for — for my poor father's sake — for what you have done for him. You—you don't know—" She turned away, as though struggling to hide her confusion, and seated herself in her father's chair by the window, gazing out across the city.

After a moment she looked at him again with serene, composed eyes, her head falling lightly back against the cushion, her small hands lying upon the padded chair-arms. The glowing noonday sunlight touched her gown and was reflected upward upon her face, casting it into strong relief against the deep, crimson background of upholstery. A warm blush lingered briefly in her cheeks, then passed, leaving no trace. She seemed wonderfully childlike and fragile, resting half buried in the chair's huge hollow. Irresistibly David moved towards her and sat down by her side.

"Tell me, what is it about your father?" he asked, with what quiet he could command. "Is he really very ill?"

"I hope not," she answered; "still, I'm afraid. He hasn't been able to sleep, and there's a high fever. His doctor has been in two or three times this morning, to administer sedatives; and he's just now injected morphine. He's gone to sleep, but the fever is increasing, and I think the doctor is worried over it, though he pretends not to be. I'm very much afraid he's going to be ill."

"Oh, you mustn't think that," David urged, cheerily. "I shouldn't be frightened, if I were you, until I saw what a day's rest will do for him. Maybe that's all he needs. I had a good sleep, and I feel as fresh as ever this morning. Why, he can't afford to be sick now; there's too much

depending on him in this Senatorial fight. He must get well again, right away."

Her glance was questioning; her hands were playing with the tasselled ends of her girdle. "Do you imagine he cares for that?" she asked. "I've never been sure of it, for myself; but, then, I don't see him as you do. That is—" She checked the sentence as with an effort; then, after an instant's hesitation, she went on quietly: "My father doesn't often reveal his real self to me. You must have seen something of his feeling when you've been here. It hasn't always been so. When I was a little girl, we used to be just jolly good friends; but since then we've grown apart somehow—oh, ever so far apart. I don't know why it is, exactly, but I suppose I'm to blame for a great deal of it." She paused again, looking at him with a soft, wistful reluctance, as though a desire for frank speech was taking account of the chance of being heard with sympathy. "I don't care very much for people," she said. "I've been largely alone, and I've gathered my own little interests, altogether different from his, and I suppose I've gotten too much wrapped up in them, so that I haven't lived enough with him and for him. We've just lost a common understanding, that's all. I have only a vague, intuitive sort of knowledge of what he's thinking about and planning. Well!" She dismissed her seriousness with a smile and a light gesture, recovering her wonted self-posses-

sion. "I ought not afflict you with my little distresses. I only meant to say that I can't tell whether he is really interested in going to the Senate, or really interested in anything, and living for it."

David regarded her with wonder, almost with pity. Much was in his mind, but he did not know what to say, more than a blunt: "Oh yes; he's going to the Senate, all right. He's given himself up to it, and he's going to win. I'm sure of that."

She changed her posture, drawing her hand wearily over her eyes, her face in repose. "I ought not have spoken as I did to you. I didn't stop to think. I'm very tired. I've been up most of the night, and then this excitement and worry—it has unnerved me a little, I suppose."

David arose, standing before her. "I'm proud of your confidence," he said, simply. "I'm glad you've told me. I'm going now, but I'll come back this evening to see how your father is, and whether there's anything I can do."

"Yes, do," she said, rising. All constraint was gone from her manner as she offered her hand in parting. "Good-bye," she said; then added, with impulsive directness: "You did a brave thing last night, Mr. Boughton, and you saved my father a lifelong regret. It has made me think very highly of you."

"Oh, you make far too much of it," he returned,

in real embarrassment. "It was your father's doing, not mine."

"Ah?" she smiled, with a note of question in the word. "The final accomplishment was his, perhaps; but the motive was yours, and that is what counts. He would not have acted as he did but for you. I shall say no more about it, my friend, if it distresses you; but so much I was bound to say, whether or no."

On the street again, David turned towards the office; but on the steps of the great building he changed his mind and kept on up the hill, striking into a long, swift stride. He must have time to think.

As he hurried onward, for a while there was nothing before him but inextricable confusion, a wild chaos, not of thoughts, but of swelling emotions, too big and turbulent to be checked and held in order. Out of the tangle, one element alone rose in clear and vivid relief. It was the face of the girl he had just left, as it had appeared to him at the moment of meeting. Try as he would —and he did try—he could not dismiss it from his imagination. After a time he ceased the useless effort, and let the image remain, dwelling upon it with a reckless abandon of delight. Its every line, its every least fraction of expression and feeling, that contributed to the elusive mystery of its loveliness, was as present before him as when she had confronted him in the flesh. It was a wonderful face, quick with the vital charm of perfect

womanhood. Yes, yes! But more than that had been revealed to him, in the warmth of her presence, in the clinging touch of her hand, in the welling light of her glorious eyes. He did not try to analyze. He knew what he had seen, and the depths of his body and soul were swept by a pulsing wave of sheer joy in the realization.

He came by-and-by in his walk to the wide seclusion of Hanscom Park, and, leaping down a wooded slope, he threw himself upon the grass beside the upper lake, lying outstretched, staring up at the meshed branches above, drawing deep breaths of the free air, smelling the sweet odors of the near earth, feeling the genial warmth of the sun upon his upturned face, making no effort of mind, but letting his thoughts slip slowly back into calm. By-and-by reaction amounted almost to apathy. He sat upright, looking at the fair scene about him, amusing himself in a dull, careless way by shooting little pellets of earth into the moss-grown brown water of the lake, considering himself.

"I wonder what's the matter with me?" he pondered. "I can't make it out. I thought I knew myself, as plain as day; but I didn't. I'm just beginning to see a little of what things might mean. What bothers me is that I don't seem to *care* more. A man oughtn't to be like that. I ought to be sorry, and ashamed, and full of a sick sort of revulsion against it. But I'm not. I'm

glad. I just wonder what Ruth would think of me, if she knew."

He took his watch from his pocket and opened the case, bringing Ruth's likeness to view, looking at it long and earnestly; then shut it away again with a stifled sigh and got to his feet.

"I give it up," he said. "I guess I'll just have to wait and see."

At the office a telegram awaited him. It was signed by Joe Keller, and had been sent from Waterloo that morning.

"Are you all right?" it read. "Your mother is anxious. Answer, quick."

As he read, the door opened, and framed in the doorway was the figure of Keller himself, a travelling-bag in his hand, his coat over his arm, his serious eyes full of eager anxiety. At sight of David his expression cleared and the sober lines of his face relaxed into a smile.

"You young rascal!" he said. "You're a nice sort of chap, aren't you?"

"Why, Joe!" David cried, with pleased warmth. "Why, what in the world brings you down? Come in."

"We'll go to the telegraph-office first, youngster," Keller returned. "Why didn't you answer my message? Your mother's at the hotel over there, and Uncle Billy has been camping out at the station since morning, making life a burden for the operator. I had hard work to keep him from coming on to Omaha with his team."

They went to the desk in the rotunda of the building and despatched a reassuring message, then returned to David's room up-stairs and settled themselves for speech. Keller filled his pipe and sat by the open west window, smoking lazily, watching the blue clouds float away upon the slow air, while the mellow light of the declining sun fell upon him, discovering the warm, living tones in his clear skin and in his thick brown hair and beard. His presence was very human, very calm, very comforting.

"You aren't going home to-night?" David asked.

"No," Keller said. "I'm going to stay awhile, now that I'm here—three or four days, most likely, working in the library. I've been trying to nerve myself to it for a good while; but I'm too contented out yonder, and it's hard to break away. Is there a quiet place near you where I can stay?"

"You'll stay with me, that's what you'll do!" David answered, with hearty emphasis. "Oh, that 'll be rich! I've been busy, Joe; but you can't think how much I've missed home. Going out on Sundays doesn't help me much, either; it's only a quick taste, when I want a full feed. I don't often get to see any one but the folks at the house. I didn't get out at all last Sunday, either. Since Mr. Watson has gone into politics I've been trying to help him. I was with them—with him—last Sunday; and now that he's sick it isn't likely

I'll go home next Sunday. There's no one but me to look after things. I'll write mother a good letter to-morrow, though."

"You ought to be at home as much as you can, Dave," Keller said, quietly. "Don't miss a chance to go. They need you, too."

His serious directness gave David a sudden uneasy qualm. "Why, Joe, there isn't anything the matter?"

"Oh no, there's nothing the matter," Keller answered. "Everything is just as it has been, except that you're gone. Your mother's well and happy in her own way. But she misses you, you don't know how sorely. I've been with her a great deal through these few weeks. I knew you'd like to have me, and I like it, too, because I think she's beginning to take a liking to me. It's a sort of all-around liking, don't you see? It's been a revelation to me. It's perfectly wonderful how a mother sinks herself in her children—a mother like yours; and the pathos of it grows when the children really don't feel the need of her devotion any longer. A man can't begin to understand it; he hasn't soul enough. I know you won't mind my speaking so plainly, will you? I'm not reproving you, Dave; I'm merely suggesting. You're a good son. Still, I know the feeling of confident youth, that doesn't need to depend upon any one. It's a glorious feeling, but it's apt to carry one away. If I had a mother, knowing what I know now, I'd spend most of my time trying to make

her believe that I was afraid to take a step without her counsel."

David listened with frank alertness, his lively eyes contemplative. Keller dispelled his seriousness with a smile.

"Don't take it too hard, old man," he said. "You haven't done anything reprehensible. I was just talking on general principles. If I were you, I'd go home every chance I got, and I'd do everything I could to make her feel that you need her more than ever."

"Yes, Joe," David said, with a simple grace of friendliness, which could not take offence at generous intention. Then: "You haven't told me a thing about your own work, Joe," he said. "That's what I want to hear about. We'll have dinner, and go down and ask after Watson, and then we'll go up to my room and *talk!* We'll set a pace for the girls to follow. Come on. I told Miss Watson I'd bring you to her when you came in. You'll like her. She's seen your work, and she's capable of appreciating it, too."

He was eager for his own next meeting with the girl. The afternoon's relaxation had abated his agitation, leaving him doubtful of his thoughts, even of his own impressions of the morning. He wanted to see her again; so much he knew certainly, and he felt a warm thrill in realizing how great his desire was. Yet he was glad of the presence of his friend.

Margaret was just leaving the dining-room as

they entered the gloomy hotel rotunda. There was a shadow of constraint in the informal meeting, in the presence of the many onlookers who lounged about in the stiff rows of chairs, idly turning the sheets of the evening papers and chewing upon their toothpicks. David felt, too, that the girl was weary after her day's nursing, though the suggestion was not in her appearance, but rather in a stately quiet of manner as she spoke a few reserved, considered words of greeting to Keller. There was no awkwardness, but only a lack of spontaneity. She led the way in silence to the parlor above, where the lights were turned low and the air was tinctured with the odors of camphor. The door into Watson's bedroom stood ajar, showing semi-darkness beyond, out of which came a sound of deep breathing.

Margaret closed the door quietly, then turned to them with a faint smile. "Be seated, please," she said, and seated herself in the corner by the window, out of the full glow of the lights, where she could feel the freshness of the outer air, still balmy as in September. "I'm sorry to welcome you in this way, Mr. Keller," she said; "and I'm sorry to have you miss meeting my father. I suppose Mr. Boughton has told you of what has happened?"

"Yes," Keller assented. "How is your father to-night?"

"No better, I fear," she said, gravely. "His doctor says he must keep his bed for several days,

at least. He has been over-excited for a long time about many things, and this experience simply served to hasten the reaction. He can sleep only with sedatives, and when he's awake he's tormented by anxiety about his work. He's one of those who don't know how to rest."

There was a quick, querulous call from the inner room. When Margaret opened the door, Watson's voice demanded: "Is that Boughton out there? I want to see him."

David stood by the bedside, taking Watson's big, burning hand between his own. "I'm very sorry we wakened you," he said.

"You didn't wake me," Watson retorted, brusquely. "It doesn't matter if you did. Say, have you been out to see Mrs. Akin to-day?"

"No, sir, I haven't," David answered, with quick contrition. "That's too bad. I haven't been near her all day."

"M—m!" Watson muttered. "Well, then, go! What do you suppose she'll think of us? It doesn't make any difference what she thinks; we oughtn't to neglect her like this. Maggie, get your hat and go out with Boughton and see if there's anything she needs. Quick, now!"

She hesitated a moment. "No," she said, calmly, "I can't go, father. I must stay here."

"Oh!" Watson cried, in nervous exasperation. "You do as I tell you. There's nothing to stay here for. I can dope myself while you're gone.

I can't rest a minute until I know how she is. *Hurry*, Maggie!"

"Pardon me," Keller interposed, from the doorway. "Let me stay with Mr. Watson. I should be glad to."

"Yes, yes!" Watson interrupted, harshly. "That 'll do all right. You stay with me, then. Now get a move on you, Maggie."

She made no further demur, but prepared herself for the street and went out with David to the car. She seemed to be in no mood for talking; during the ride she sat in a corner of the car, leaning against the back of the seat, her hands clasped in her lap, volunteering not a word, and answering David's ventures almost with reluctance. When they stood before the gate, at the end of their way, she hung back with a shuddering sigh.

"Must I go in?" she breathed. "I can't do any good. Let me wait for you out here."

"You'd better come," David returned. "You'll be of more account than I—a woman always is at such times."

"Very well," she answered, and followed as he led the way around to the back door.

The tiny kitchen showed no change since the night before; a fire burned briskly in the little stove, as then, and the one dim oil-lamp struggled bravely. Beside the stove stood the old wife's chair, and another was drawn up before the glow of the grate, its cushions beaten up into inviting lightness.

Mrs. Akin herself had answered the knock at the door. "Oh, it's Paul's friend!" she said, when her squinting eyes were sure of David's face. "And where's Paul? Ain't he come, too?"

"Mr. Watson isn't feeling well to-day," David answered, pressing the worn old hand. "He wasn't quite able to come; but I've brought his daughter, Mrs. Akin. This is Miss Margaret."

The old woman peered at the girl with a child-like eagerness. "Paul's da'ter?" she questioned. "Well, I do say, deary! My, my, what a nice girl! I wonder how it comes I 'ain't ever seen you before. Come right over by the fire an' sit down. No, not that place!" she interposed, quickly. "Here's chairs. That one's his'n. It's a foolish notion, maybe, but I don't want nobody to set in it awhile yet. Now you're comfortable, ain't you? Well, I am so glad to see you both."

"Are you all alone?" David asked, as the stillness of the little house became apparent.

"Just for a while," she answered, in gentle deprecation. "Some of my neighbors has been in to set with me most o' the day; but they've all got their own families to think about, too, you know, and they've gone home to get supper. They'll be comin' back pretty soon. I 'ain't been a bit lonesome all day, except for wantin' to see my boy Paul. You say he's sick?" she asked of Margaret. "I hope it ain't nothin' bad."

"Oh no! He's a little worn out, Mrs. Akin,

that's all," the girl answered. "He'll be better again in a day or two."

"Of course he will!" the old woman agreed readily. "And so you're his da'ter! Well, now, that seems right curious to me, deary. Somehow I never thought about Paul's havin' a growed-up girl like you. I s'pose it's because he's always seemed to me so much like a boy hisself — so kind o' light-hearted an' full o' spirits, you know. I knew he had a da'ter; but I reckoned you was just a child. I don't know what made me think so, unless maybe it was just my not seein' you."

Margaret's eyes were large and intent in their puzzled scrutiny; but she said, simply, "You'll see more of me after this."

"That's nice," the other woman returned. "I'll be awful glad to have you come—I'd be glad for nothin' except just your belongin' to Paul; but then I'm bound to like you for yourself, too, I know, because you look like such a good girl. I don't see how you could help bein', with Paul for your father. He's been a mighty comfort to us—me an' Mart. Oh! I expect you'd like to see Mart, wouldn't you?" she interjected, suddenly, with a note of kindly indulgence. "Why, of course you would! They brought him home this afternoon, all fixed up so nice I wa'n't right sure 'twas him at first. He's in the parlor. Come right on in and I'll show him to you."

She took the lamp from the table and opened the door leading into the front room, entering

ahead. Margaret laid a nervous hand upon David's arm and clung to him for a moment, trembling; then followed with rapid step.

It was a barren little room, like the other, but instead of an air of homely cheer there was upon it that stiff coldness which marks poverty's bravest pretensions to grandeur. Starched muslin curtains hung like sheets of ice over the square windows; against the gaudily papered wall forbidding hair-cloth chairs were ranged in an attitude of grim formality; and from the ceiling depended an ugly, glittering brass lamp, dangling its score of iridescent glass prisms. But these poor details were of little moment, once the eye had perceived the silent, black-draped presence in the middle of the room, looming large in the feeble light, its huge, sombre shadow obscuring all that lay beyond.

The old wife stepped to the side of the bier, turning back the coffin-lid with a steady hand, bringing to view the dead face. David offered to take the lamp from her grasp, but she checked the movement.

"No, I can hold it all right. I won't let it drop." Her calm was as perfect as that of the dead body, her face as steadfast and as free of pain. She put out her hand and lightly arranged a lock of silvery hair that lay over the unruffled brow, and her fingers showed no tremor.

"I ain't grievin'," she said, with sweet placidity. "I know it's best. He was a good man, and he

was always willin' the Lord should have His way. I know he don't mind bein' dead; and why should I mind, if he don't?" She bent low over the unresponsive face, speaking to it with an unfathomable gentleness. "No, I ain't goin' to grieve another mite, dear heart, because I know you're well, an' stout, an' happy, an' waitin' for me to come. An' it won't be long—no, no; it 'll be just a little while, my husband!"

Margaret had stood apart, looking on in deep agitation. As though fascinated, she drew nearer, step by step, her fingers knotted together, her parted lips colorless, her tense body bent forward, her gaze fixed upon the inscrutable gray face. Upon irresistible impulse she put out her hand and lightly touched the quiet forehead, then drew back with a smothered, gasping cry and fled from the room.

Mrs. Akin closed the casket gently and followed after the girl, who stood beside the glowing stove, cowering, shaking, her eyes burning, her cheeks of a livid pallor.

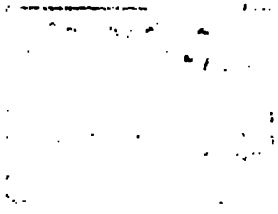
"Oh, please shut the door!" she begged, her pleading hands outstretched.

"Why, Miss Watson!" David cried, in astonishment. She seized upon him like one drowning, clutching him, hiding her terrified face against him.

"Oh, please take me away!" she whispered, in an agony of emotion.

The elder woman saw and understood. "Yes,"

"'OH, PLEASE TAKE ME AWAY!'"



she said, "I guess she better go. There's nothing you can do now. There 'll be somebody comin' in in a minute or so. That's right; you take her out, poor lamb!"

On the street, under the brilliant stars, with the warm, living air breathing upon her, the girl controlled herself with a great effort. "How foolish of me!" she said, with an hysterical, mirthless laugh. "But I couldn't help it. I never saw death before; and, oh, it's dreadful, dreadful, dreadful! I'll never forget it while I live—the terror of it, and the awful stillness. Oh, I wonder why we must die!"

Moved by a great, pitying tenderness, David put his arm about her bowed shoulders and drew her firmly to his side, holding her close, stooping above her. She did not resist; she lay quite still for the space of three hurried heart-beats, then drew away with a deep-drawn sigh.

"I am ashamed of myself," she said. "What must you think of me?"

He caught her hand in his and held it fast, lifting it to his lips passionately. Aged death lay within; but young life must have its way without. "Will you let me tell you what I think of you?" he cried, harshly. "Margaret!"

For a swift instant she faced him there, in the warm dusk, beneath the gemmed sky, disclosing to him the marvellous dark glory of her eyes, every fibre of her quick body yielding; but then,

with an inarticulate murmur, she released her hand and started away from him in tremulous alarm.

"No, no!" she panted. "You must not—not —not now!"

XIX

AN hour later David and Joe were wandering about the quiet, shaded streets on the crest of the hill, where the comfortable homes of the town were grouped, set in wide, open lawns, with broad spaces between. Most of the houses were darkened, and they had the world almost to themselves. Only now and then was there a disturbing sound of footsteps on the stone flagging of the walks, as a belated pedestrian hurried homeward. Now and again they saw a motor-car passing on the distant lines, its yellow lights glinting through the trees, its humming whine softened and remote. To the eastward the massed lights of the city glimmered in close array; but on the other slope of the hill was darkness, stretching away and away in the dim, billowy roll of the prairie, that was lost in the obscurity of the far horizon. They were well pleased by the undisturbed silence; it fell in perfectly with their mood, long indulged at home, when they had been used to walking the country roads at night, talking as now of whatever was uppermost in their minds or quickest in their hearts. Night is a good time for confidence; the stars and trees

invite sincerity, encourage revelation to the utmost, making the honest man ashamed of anything less than full disclosure. Keller was remarking upon this as they strolled leisurely along.

"A man is in a bad way when he loses the old habit of looking at the stars," he said. "It's a sign of emotional decadence. Men in town don't do it very much; I suppose because they have so many brighter lights that catch the eye first. But an electric-lamp is a very poor substitute for a star. Men used to find the stars useful, too—a chart drawn by the hand of the Almighty, with never an error in it. I wonder how many of the people of our generation in Omaha could find their way across country by night with nothing to guide them but that chart? Not many. Most of them would have to call for the police, or else sit down and wait until morning. They wouldn't be comfortable in waiting, either; they'd be in a cold sweat of fear, jumping at every little wild sound, frightened if a toad hopped in the grass beside them. The very thought of lying down on the ground and going to sleep would terrify them. I know the feeling. After my four years in Paris, when I came back to the Elkhorn again and tried to take up the old life, it was hard work for a while. It was months before I could walk out at night and face the stars without an impulse of crying, 'Unclean! unclean!' like a leper. I suppose you don't know that feeling."

"No, not yet," David answered, soberly. He

had not been attending closely to the quiet speech — hearing without heeding. There was something else he wanted to talk about; in trying to brace himself for it he had suffered Keller to direct speech in whatever channel he chose, content to halt along behind. Keller had appeared not to notice the reticence as anything unusual; they had always been used, between themselves, to long intervals like this, when neither cared to talk. Keller kept on and on with his easy monologue; not impassioned, but calm, stopping frequently to take account of the beauties of earth or sky as they appeared at every turn of the way. His pipe burned evenly and well— sure index to his tranquillity of spirit. As so often happens on the lower levels of the prairies, the warmth and vitality of summer lingered in the air, reluctant to give way; so far as signs went, it might have been a June night; its soft touch wooed them into loitering, caressed them, comforted them.

They came to a stone wall under the trees, enclosing a smooth, upward-sloping grass-plot, with a big, square-shouldered house standing far above, looming in a black mass against the clear dusk of the sky. There David stopped, seating himself upon the broad top of the wall, Keller standing before him.

"Joe," David broke out, abruptly, his smothered wish coming all at once to a head—"tell me, old man, what did you think of her?"

"What?" Keller asked, perplexedly. The question was a sudden obstruction in the current of his thoughts. "What did I think of whom?"

"I mean Miss Watson," David blurted. "She's a wonderful woman, Joe. I wondered if you'd see it as I wanted you to."

"Oh!" Keller said, with light indifference. "No; I missed that. All women are more or less wonderful, at one time or another; but if there's anything really extraordinary in her, I didn't see it."

"Nothing at all?"

"Not quite that, maybe. She has rather remarkable beauty, of a certain sort, and her whole appearance is good; but she didn't make any particular appeal to me."

"There wasn't time enough," David said, eagerly bent upon explaining and justifying this disturbing short-sightedness. "You must have seen, if you'd had a little more time. She *is* wonderful. I hoped you'd see it, because I want you to help me."

"Help you?" Keller echoed, mystified. Then: "What do you mean? What's on your mind, Dave? What did you want me to find in her?"

"Oh, I can't tell you! It's no use to try. If you didn't see it, you couldn't believe it. Everything fine and good that could possibly belong to a woman."

There was a long, awkward interval. "I saw nothing so unusual," Keller declared, bluntly; "nothing to distinguish her from many other

women I've known—beautiful women, fully aware of their charms. It isn't likely that's what you mean."

"No, no, no!" David protested. "Not that at all. She isn't that. I don't see how you can think so. It must be that you weren't looking for anything in particular. She's wonderful, I tell you — wonderful, wonderful! I've never known another woman like her. There isn't another."

Keller attended quietly, standing erect, only the swelling volume of his pipe-smoke under his quickened puffing betraying more than a passing interest. Soon he drew closer and sat down upon the wall at David's side.

"Tell me, Dave," he said, again, "what's on your mind?"

David hesitated, struggling against a strong sense of isolation and despair of being understood. There are times in the life of every man when no friendship is quite close enough to fit in with his desire to share his personal burdens with a sympathetic friend. But David's need mastered this feeling.

"I love her, Joe, with my whole heart," he said, with quick, desperate resolve.

"David!" The word was a cry, sharp, pained, full of surprise, doubt, incredulity. Keller sprang to his feet and moved for a few steps along the walk, then turned and confronted David, coming slowly back to him. "Oh, boy," he said, huskily,

"what's the matter with you? What are you saying?"

"Just the plain truth," David returned. It was easy now for resolution to persist. "Does it seem so hard to believe? Is it so very terrible? I sha'n't tell you anything but the truth; and I'll tell you all of it, every word, if you'll let me. It can't surprise you or hurt you more than it has me. I've been fairly stunned. I can't think straight. That's why I'm asking you to help."

Keller's pipe fell from his relaxed grasp to the stones, and its amber stem snapped into pieces. He knelt, groping about for the fragments, then arose, occupying himself for a moment in a futile endeavor to fit the bits together. But his hands were uncertain; the fragments escaped one by one and dropped upon the walk. He gave up the effort, put the beloved bowl safely away, then stood with his hands plunged deep into his pockets.

"Well!" he said, heavily. He appeared like one trying to rise with a great load upon him. "I don't know— You've knocked me all into a heap, Dave. I see stars. It seems past belief."

"I know, I know!" David cried, with straining intensity. "I couldn't have believed it of myself a week ago—not even yesterday. It's just happened to-day."

"Oh!" Keller exclaimed, relief contending with anxiety in the tone. "Is that all? Why do you want to scare a fellow with such a vagary? You're all worked up and excited by this affair. No won-

der you're a little crazy. Come, let's go home and go to bed. You'll be saner in the morning."

But David seized the man's arm in a fierce grip, holding him fast. "No, no!" he cried. "I must talk now, Joe—right here and now; and you must listen and help me. I know what you think; but I'm surer than I ever was in my life before, about anything. I'm perfectly sure. It isn't just a thing of to-day. I feel as though it must have begun years ago — as though I'd been getting ready for this, and for nothing else, all my life. Don't you believe such things can happen?"

Keller groaned aloud in helpless distress. "You boy!"

David broke into a short, rasping laugh, half exasperation and half exultation. "I was a boy until to-day," he said. "I've been like a five-year-old playing on the floor with a lot of toys, and not even dreaming that there was anything else in life. But I know better now."

They were seated again upon the top of the wall. Keller hooked his hands about his bent knees and rocked slowly backward and forward, his face upturned to the jewelled sky, deeply distraught. By-and-by he said, almost curtly: "What do you want of me? You don't want me to argue you out of it?"

"No!" David cried, in quick impatience. "No, of course I don't. But there's Ruth."

Keller's indrawn breath hissed through his teeth. "Ah, yes!" he said, with a palpable

effort. "To be sure—Ruth! Well, what about Ruth?"

"Oh," David complained, "if you won't try to understand I can't make you. You know well enough what the trouble is."

"I might guess," Keller returned; "but you said you were going to tell me everything. I can't know how you feel until you tell me."

His manner was controlled now, even calm, and it brought something of ease to David's intense, chafing thoughts.

"Forgive me, Joe," he said, more quietly. "I am excited. It's just this. I loved Ruth when I came away from home, with the best love I'd ever felt for any one. That last night I all but told her so. She knew how I felt, as perfectly as though I'd put it into plain words, every bit of it. You know how it had been. I'd grown up with her, and knew her for just what she was and is, one of the dearest girls in the world. I didn't think of anybody but her, and the best thing I dared hope for was to know she cared for me. I didn't want anything else. I was going to live for her, and the thought of her and her love was to keep me forever. I couldn't have believed that anything could shake that feeling. But now that I've known Margaret, I feel as though it had been nothing but a card-house, and it's tumbled down. I'm not belittling Ruth—God knows I couldn't do that!—but Margaret—I love her, and I know she loves me!"

"Yes," Keller said, softly. "Has she told you so?"

"No," David answered, readily. "But that doesn't matter. To-night, when we were out together, I asked her to let me speak, and she wouldn't. But she knows, and I know! I said as much to her as I ever did to Ruth. There's no difference."

"Wait a moment!" Keller interposed. "There's a mighty difference between the women." He hesitated long, and when he went on it was with manifest labor, every word escaping hard. "It's a thankless task you're giving me, in your state of mind. You aren't likely to take much stock in anything I say. If I say anything, it must be just what I think, without any reservations for mistaken friendship's sake."

"Yes, yes!" David exclaimed, impatiently. "I tell you I'm not a child now. Go on. I want plain talk."

But Keller took a long time for meditating upon the matter. "I shouldn't have thought it possible for you to love such a woman," he said at last. "Hers is about the last of all types that ought to attract a man like you. It's pretty nearly grotesque. But, then, the whole business of sex attraction is almost terrible in the blind way it works and the dreadful things that come out of it. It absolutely defies all reason. The worst of it is that such men as you — simple-hearted, clean, honest fellows—are the ones who

have to suffer most. Healthy, red-blooded chaps like you must fall in love with somebody, as a matter of course. It's the natural outlet for your ecstatic youth. In animals, that makes good stock; but with men it breeds torment. Unless youth has a lot of iron and granite in its will, nine times in ten it will yield to the strongest sex attraction and ignore everything else; and the nearest attraction is most likely to be the strongest. Yes, I know, I know!" he said, sharply, as David swung out his arms in a broad gesture of protest. "That sounds to you like an unfeeling and base view to take of your present passion. But you said I was to talk straight. I say it's fairly tragic, the ease with which healthy young people mate. That sort of passion is very adaptable, though. If a warm-blooded boy can't get his first love, he easily finds another, and offers her a heart that carries no visible scars from his first disappointment. If anything, his frenzy is only increased by waiting. Oh, I don't decry frenzy, if it's governable. I like passion—I like the man who has capacity for great passion, if he's strong enough to keep it steadfast. If he can't do that, he'd better never feel a stir of it. Steadfast passion makes for happiness and security, but those brief flashes only disconcert and destroy. Steadfastness is the only motive worth while in a man's life, in any of its phases."

"But, Joe!" David cried, quite beside himself

with repressed feeling. "Must I be faithful to a notion after I've found out it's a mistake, just because I've committed myself to it? Do you think that sort of steadfastness would be likely to make for happiness? Isn't it better to admit the mistake decently, and start right?"

"Not quite so fast," Keller said. He was almost tranquil now, though there was a fine depth and breadth of earnestness in his bearing. "I was just working around to what I want to say. No, I shouldn't want a man to stand by a discovered mistake, and go to ruin with it. That would be puerile. But what strikes me as very strange is the buoyant confidence of a young fellow who's just found out his liability to mistakes. He seems even more cocksure than ever of his security. And that isn't all. The tragedy of it is that when a man is standing within the shadow of a great impending mistake, as I think you're doing now, with all his enthusiasm bent on it, everything outside the shadow looks unreal to him. His eyes get used to the dark, I suppose, and the light hurts. I feel perfectly sure, Dave, that you're near making an awful blunder. You're so desperately young and untried. I don't know what to say about that woman without seeming heartless and cruel. You won't thank me for it. But I'll try to make you see that I'm intending your good. I'll tell you something, before we're through, which ought to convince you of that. Even if you can't be-

lieve it, I've seen women like Miss Watson before—a hundred of them, with practically nothing to choose among the lot. She's new to you, that's all. That's her charm for you. I know the feeling. You're just at that susceptible age when woman's art is most enticing, and when honest, frank simplicity of motive and behavior in a woman is very apt to cheapen her for you. That's the difference between Ruth and Miss Watson. Now just wait! It has to be said. There's no good in stopping half-way. It's perfectly plain to me that Miss Watson is one of those women with whom life is an art, its least action carefully thought out, all its effects well considered beforehand. She's not rare, except perhaps in the variety of her resources and the degree of her skill in using them. Whether you believe it or not, I tell you that no word or smile of hers ever grows naturally out of a frank, unstudied impulse; that's next to impossible. She isn't wholly to blame for it; she's a social product. But that doesn't help matters a bit. The worst thing that could happen to a man of your sort would be to marry such a woman. You haven't anything in common, and never could have. I don't believe she'd ever think of going so far as to marry you, or any other man in your condition. I'm not considering her danger, but yours. She isn't in any danger. She's merely interested in you because you're a novelty. That isn't the feeling that marriage is built on. She's wise,

David. Even if her marrying you were conceivable, she'd make you unspeakably wretched."

"For God's sake, Joe!" David groaned, in abject dismay. "Oh, don't talk like that! You don't understand at all. She's not such a woman as that. I can't bear to think so. Can't you say something better than that? I couldn't have believed that of you. You don't know how it hurts me."

"'Faithful are the wounds of a friend,'" Keller returned, with gentle insistence. "I'm your friend, David. I don't want you to forget that for a minute. Do you think I'm hurting you for fun? I'd give my hand to see you happy, if that would do it. That's why I'm trying to get you awake to your folly. It is folly, and nothing else. You're losing Ruth, a perfect angel of honesty and goodness, for the remote chance of gaining a woman who doesn't know the meaning of honest love. Why, Ruth is so much above her—"

"Oh, don't!" David beseeched. "You're only making it a thousand times harder. I wish I hadn't spoken to you at all. You're not helping me. Do you think I haven't considered Ruth? I have—I have! If it weren't for her I shouldn't hesitate an instant. But Ruth trusts me to love her, after what I've said; and now I can't. I love Margaret better than all the rest of the world beside. You seem to leave that out altogether. You can't have known anything of what love really is, and what it can do. That's what

makes it so easy for you to talk. Why, love can do anything, Joe, if it's like this."

Keller did not answer at once. His idle rocking stopped and he sat quite still, staring straight before him. The silence became oppressive—a heavy weight.

"Listen, boy," he said, by-and-by. "I must tell you something. It will change your mind about my point of view. Maybe it won't help you much, right away, but you ought to know it. If it does nothing else, it 'll show you that I'm not so unfeeling as you think." His voice was level and perfectly controlled in its even accents; he bent forward, his shoulders drooping, his face supported in his open palms. "I never knew before just what your feeling for Ruth was," he said. "I couldn't have wished anything better for you than to gain her; but I didn't know you'd really thought of it until the very day you left home, and then it wasn't clear; it was only a surmise. On that morning I drove into town with Ruth, and on the way I asked her to be my wife. She said no, of course. I'd dreamed of it for a long time, trying to persuade myself that I was fit for her. There was a new loveliness upon her that morning. She seemed perfectly happy, like a child, and there was something in her eyes I'd never seen before. I was foolish enough to take it to myself and let it carry me away. I know now what it was. It was love for you, David. You don't know what you're risking. I never saw such a look on any

"WITH A DESPAIRING CRY DAVID THREW HIMSELF DOWN UPON THE WALL"

woman's face. It was just divine. I'd give my life for one such look from her, knowing it was for me. Now do you wonder that I've been talking plainly?"

With a despairing cry David threw himself down upon the wall, covering his head with his arms, his strong young body shaken by a tumult of sobs, his tears coming free and unchecked. It was the best relief for his pent feelings. Keller sat by, waiting for the boyish grief to spend itself, not offering to interfere with its course. Over the tangled glitter of the city's lights the east was softly aglow with a clear, prophetic radiance. The man's eyes lingered upon the tender glory, watching it grow and grow, until out of the silver deeps rose the great moon, a globe of warm gold, suffusing all the world, touching the black shadows and spiriting them away. It was a beautiful night, full of an indescribable tranquillity, and it brought to the heart of the man a mighty sense of reassurance, in which all lighter disturbing emotions were sunk and lost. He was willing to let that peace possess him.

David sat up, his face showing white and drawn in the moonlight, his moist eyes brilliant.

"Dear little Ruth," he said, in a half-whisper. He drew close to Keller's side, laying his arm over the bent shoulders. "Joe," he said, gently, "I'm not worthy of such a friend as you. I'm not very much of a man, after all, I'm afraid. But I can't see it any other way; to save my soul I can't. I

love Margaret with all the strength I have, and all the rest looks poor and thin beside that. What am I to do?"

"There's the impatient boy in you," Keller returned, soberly. "You'd like to have it all settled out of hand. But big things don't happen so, David. I don't see anything for it but to wait. Isn't a right solution worth waiting for? Come, we'll go home now. You must get some rest. You're nearly played out, and no wonder, dear old chap. Rest is what you need more than anything else just now."

They walked slowly homeward, talking of other things in a dull, desultory fashion, making no great pretence to sustained speech. Once in his room, David undressed and threw himself upon his bed in utter weariness, to fall asleep without delay. But Keller sat over by the window facing the east, where the moonlight covered him with its soft glory, comforting his soul. He took no account of time. The moon moved steadily on its stealthy way towards the zenith, until its light was no more than a thin band upon the window-ledge, and the low rim of the horizon was melting with the warmth of dawn. He fell asleep in his chair at last, and did not awaken until the day's work upon the street below was well begun. David still slumbered heavily. Keller found a book and sat down again, waiting.

XX

THERE were bad days that followed for David; days of high-strung expectancy of something to happen, he knew not what, that would resolve and dispel his difficulties. It was a primitive sort of mood—that of most men when for the first time they are brought to face the intricate conditions wherein good and evil, right and wrong—the items in the great profit-and-loss account of life—lie awaiting disentanglement, and when the obligation of making choice of one or another line of positive conduct becomes imperative and sharply personal. In the stress of strong action, youth's first ideas of life's values are seldom fixed by wise, patient, courageous judgment; a great deal is always expected of the god in the machine—of fortune, fate, or destiny—in bringing things to pass. David felt himself wholly incapable of seizing hold upon the broken threads of emotion and motive and knotting them up of his own will; that, he was vaguely sure, must be done by a power other than his—a power acting through him, perhaps, but still outside himself.

He fell in quite helplessly with Keller's suggestion of waiting, though it was not a patient wait-

ing; neither was there a willingness to abide by the result, but rather an impetuous, overmastering determination that things must turn out to his liking, yet with credit to his troubled conscience.

Keller did not remain in Omaha longer than was necessary for the completion of his errand. After two or three days he returned to his home on the Elkhorn. David was not altogether sorry to have him go. Generous as their confidence had been, now that he was practically thrown back upon his own resources David felt a curious uneasiness in the man's quiet presence, as though Keller's understanding of all that was in his heart, his share in the trial, and his larger power of self-restraint, were a definite if unspoken accusation against the sincerity of his own attitude. He was uneasy, chafing, hungry for consolation, yet reluctant to give any sign of his need. He did not take counsel again with Keller; neither spoke upon the matter so near the hearts of both until the very hour of Keller's leave - taking, when they walked the station platform awaiting the signal of the train's departure.

"Tell mother I'm all right, Joe, will you?" David said then. "I'll be home as soon as I can get away and spend a couple of days with her. But I can't go this Sunday, on Watson's account. I must be on hand if he needs me. He'll be out soon, and then I'll make up to mother for everything. You tell her how it is, Joe."

"All right, old man, I'll tell her," Keller assured

him. Then, with his foot on the car-step, he gave David's hand a warm, lingering pressure. "We're good friends, Dave, always. Don't let yourself forget that, if you ever need my help in any way. I'm mighty fond of you, and just as anxious as you are to have this thing come out right; and I'm sure it will, too, if you'll only keep your courage and make up your mind to take the right way when it's clear to you. The saving thing about doubt is that it doesn't often last long, if only a man's perfectly honest with himself. Good-bye. If you need me, say so. Good-bye!"

David's meetings with Margaret were very frequent in those few days. It could not have been otherwise, while necessity took him continually to Watson's rooms, save as she might have avoided him deliberately. But there was no avoidance; there was no change at all in her attitude towards him. On the day following their visit to Mrs. Akin, she met him with her usual serenity, as though nothing had occurred to cause embarrassment or to vary their former relations. If there was any constraint it was all on David's part, but it speedily vanished before her calm self-possession. He had not been able to forecast her behavior or his own after the events of that night; he was glad to find her tacitly ignoring them and abating nothing of her frankness, giving no sign that she desired anything but a continuance of their old cordial friendship, allowing the present to suffice for just now and the future to care for

itself. He welcomed the sense of freedom which this gave him—not that he doubted in the least, but only that he would be doubly sure.

And as he encountered her from day to day, entering each time into some fresh realization and enjoyment of her great beauty, getting a new understanding of her subtler charm and power, and not denying himself the right to see and feel to the utmost, he found that what might have been at first only an emotional impulse was becoming an absolute conviction. He loved her. No lesser word would take the place of "love" in his thoughts; and he determined that he would one day ask her to be his wife.

And Ruth? He resolved that he would not keep cowardly silence with Ruth, though he knew not what he could say to her. Their understanding had been definite enough in spirit, though wholly intangible in terms; not one explicit word of pledge had passed between them to afford him a clear right to go to her now with explanation. But it must come somehow; his honest love of justice, no less than his great regard for her, would discover a way to make all plain. Though his distress recurred again and again, he was always able to dismiss it with that assurance; and in the intervals there was the living, comforting certainty of his love for Margaret—a certainty that would not keep company with doubt.

New thoughts came to him — thoughts of a larger future than he had ever dreamed of. He

must build in a way worthy of Margaret, and so show himself worthy of her. It had been all so different with Ruth; she had seemed to make no demand upon him to do great things or to be other than what he was. He would have been to her only David, her husband; she would have been to him only Ruth, his wife—a sweet companion, a comfort, even a joy, but surely not an inspiration to the splendid achievements possible to manhood. She would have been content had he crowned her with field flowers; but he must win jewels for Margaret.

Before the end of a week Watson was around again, weak of body, peevishly irascible of temper, but bent upon taking up his work. On the morning of his return to his desk his pleasure was noticeable despite his nervous irritability.

"I can't stand it, Boughton, to be obliged to lie quiet in a dark room and meditate," he declared. "That self-examination business is out of my line. I hate myself too much, to begin with. I want to keep busy on something else and forget myself. I've heard people say they were at their spiritual best in those contemplative hours alone; but they're different from me. The thoughts I have at such times are like toads and spiders—I'd rather have 'em stay in their holes. I nearly went crazy this week, lying there and lifting the closed hatchways of my soul and letting out the ugly brood to hop and crawl over my bed.

No, sir! The only time when I feel safe is when I'm in action—busy, busy, busy!"

He attacked his work with a desperate, grim energy; but his strength was not equal to sustained application. After an hour's trial he gave it up with an angry exclamation of disgust, throwing his book into a corner.

"It makes me sick! I'm getting old and played out and no account. Pick up that book, will you, and put it away."

He lounged back in his chair, his huge figure limply relaxed, his eyes aglow with a savage revulsion against his weakness. He took up his ivory paper-cutter and bent it between his fingers until it snapped in two, then dropped the pieces deliberately into the waste-basket and delivered a sharp kick, sending the basket flying across the room, scattering its rubbish over the floor.

"I'm in a sweet frame of mind for a grown man," he roared. "I wish there was somebody to give me a sound licking and straighten me out. Why don't you do it?"

But David was pleased to find him in this humor. He wanted to talk, and wanted the talk to be plain, free of all mistaken mildness or considerate refinements of expression.

"Mr. Watson," he said, abruptly, "I've been thinking about the future — my own future, I mean—trying to see into it a little; but it isn't clear. I've been wondering if you can't help me some."

Watson's restless fidgeting ceased as he scowled into the young face.

"What's worrying you?" he asked, dully. "Future? What do you care about the future? You'd better let it alone. I never knew any good to come of meddling with it."

"But it's time I'm making up my mind what I'm going to do with myself," David returned, earnestly. "I must begin to think about a defined career. I'm getting past the trifling age."

Watson's scowl persisted. "Fudge!" he snorted. "A career! What's the good of that? Why, look at me! I ought to be a warning to you not to get that notion stuck in your crop. I've had a career. When I was your age I set out to be somebody and amount to something, and I made everything serve that end. Now look at me! My life's gone, except for a few gray years that I'd be glad to chuck after the rest, and I haven't got one decent thing to show for it. I haven't shirked, nor I haven't played the coward or the scoundrel; I've worked hard and fought desperately to win something that I thought would be worth while; yet all I've got is a sense of failure and disgust with the whole business—just a sick taste in my mouth. Is that what you want? I'll lay odds of a hundred to one that's what you'll get, if you keep on as you're beginning."

He paused, amusing himself for a time by swinging around in his chair, making the springs

creak beneath his weight, his impatience gathering an added vehemence as the noise rasped his nerves.

"You were a fool to leave home in the first place, with the thought of bettering yourself," he said, harshly. "If you'll listen to me, you'll go back there and stay. That's where you belong."

"But, Mr. Watson—" David began, in remonstrance. But Watson cut him short.

"There's no 'but' about it. You invite me to say it when you begin talking such twaddle. You're a fool, a whole fool, and nothing but a fool. Oh, I know what you think. You'd like to remind me of this Senate business, as a worthy end to a hard life, and all that. Rot! As if that counted! I'm going to the Senate, but it's only a drowning man's last hopeless effort to save himself. I know in advance what it 'll cost me. I'll suffer agony and get nothing but bitterness and an increased distrust. There isn't one of these fawning political friends of mine that wouldn't betray and sell me out in a minute if he could do it at a profit. That isn't what I've been hunting for in life. Would you be willing to trade places with me and take my cards and play them out and abide by the result? Do you think I wouldn't swap? I'd give the whole six years, and all their glory and reward, for just one single day of the sort of life that you're so anxious to quit. You don't know what you're

giving up—freedom, the work most worthy of a man, the certainty of earned rewards, and the chance of coming to the end of a decent, happy life in self-respecting content. In God's name, Boughton, what more than that do you want? I know how you feel. I felt the same way once. I chose the part you're choosing, and I've seen it through, the best I knew how, and I tell you there's no good in it. How can there be? It's artificial and vain and stupidly false from beginning to end. Can't you see the harm it's done right here in Nebraska? What's the good in this State of a big, overgrown scheme of politics and laws? All it does is to fatten a lot of parasitic politicians and lawyers. We'd be a lot better off here on the prairies if we had no laws but the Ten Commandments, and if the whole gang of lawyers and law-makers were compelled to go to work and earn their living like men. And look at Omaha! Could anything be more artificial or more abjectly silly than to set about building a metropolitan city in the middle of these farms? A hundred thousand people, where thirty thousand would be more than enough for all the real work there is to do now. A market-place—that's all the farmers need here right now. They're supporting seventy thousand useless people just for the sake of being in the fashion and having a metropolis. And now you want to join the seventy thousand and have what you call a 'career,' and make the people

pay for it. I'd like to know what right you have to ask them to do it. It's a mighty narrow, selfish desire; it isn't even respectable, except by a powerful stretching of some of the good old standards of behavior. A man ought to be dead sure of his call before he essays that rôle. You don't seem to be sure. If you were you wouldn't be coming to me for counsel."

David had sat quite helpless under the rushing fall of words. He could only wait until Watson's strange fury had spent itself. Curiously enough he felt no resentment; his mind seemed suddenly to lack even enough of elasticity to be resentful.

"But I am sure," he declared, after a moment. "You misjudge me altogether. There's other work in the world besides the sort I've known—good work, too, that a man needn't be ashamed of, and that's what I want to have a hand in. I'm no drone, and don't mean to be. I want to be of some real use. I want a bigger usefulness than I had at home. That's perfectly respectable, isn't it?"

"A bigger usefulness?" Watson echoed. "Such as what? If a man's going to be useful he must minister to some real need of his fellows. That's the only way. What's your idea? To feed the hungry? How can you do that any better than by raising wheat—making the earth fruitful? Or to reform the world's morals? How can you do that any better than by setting a plain, easy example of manly righteousness? We've already

got too far away from first principles—from the sound morality of the soil; we're breaking all our contacts with nature as fast as we can, when we ought to know that nature is the only possible source of health. The world's morals won't be reformed until we repair the breaks. We've got to set our feet on the soil again. You had no business to leave it for a share in this big, false, crazy scheme of modern life. I left it and I'm paying the price, and trying not to whine because I'm finding the price too high. It's too late for me to turn back now; but I'll call it square if I can prevent your following after me. Haven't you seen enough? Do you suppose it 'll be a joy to me to win out in the legislature and take my senatorship, with that good old man's blood in my memory? And that's just one little part of what these days are bringing me. The best thing you can possibly do, while your soul's still fresh, is to go back home and stay there, and do your work and live your life and be sure of yourself. That's too much to surrender for a breathless chase after a flying shadow. For Heaven's sake, boy, give it up and go back!"

But David shook his head, his lips set, his eyes unyielding.

"No. I can't see it that way at all," he said, stoutly. "I don't believe it's inevitable that I must suffer your disappointment, just because I want to cut loose from the farm and do work that I think I'm better fitted for."

"Well, what's that?" Watson cut in. "What is it you want to do?"

David flushed under the direct question. "That's where I want your help," he confessed, frankly. "I'm not sure of the means, but I want to win a place in life where I can use my powers and have standing and recognition. Maybe I'm not such a hopeless fool as you think. I've learned honesty, for one thing, and I think I know how to apply it in other ways besides following the plough. I want to be more with men than I could be out there in the fields; I want to mix with them and influence them and have a hand in affairs and make a reputation for myself by-and-by—not just a name, but a good reputation. That isn't just vanity. I'm not vain. For one thing, I want my mother to know she has a son who can do the things other men are doing in the world. And besides," he continued, with brave determination, "I'll have a wife some day, most likely, and I want to make a place for her."

"Ah!" Watson breathed with a sharp wince of pain. "A wife, eh? That's the idea, is it? Well, that—I reckon that puts me out of the discussion. I can't argue that point with you."

"Oh!" David said, in contrition. "I didn't think. Forgive me. I'm sorry if I've hurt you."

"All right," Watson returned, with a gesture of dismissal. "Never mind. I wish you joy, on general principles, and we'll let it go at that." He gave himself up to silence for a time, his chin sunk

upon his breast, his heavy features twitching; then a sigh swelled his broad chest. "All right," he repeated. "I'll take it for granted you know your own mind, in a general way. I understand pretty well, I reckon. If you're really bent on it, you'd better see a little of how the game's played before you put up your own chips. You ought to meet some different kinds of men and get on to their pretty little ways. I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll take you to Washington as my secretary, if you like. That 'll be good training, and maybe open the way to something you want. How does that suit you?"

David glowed with the warmth of quick enthusiasm, and his hand was outstretched in a gratitude he could not put into words. Watson took the offered hand and pressed it, while upon his face there gathered an expression of unwonted gentleness.

"Yes, you're a fool," he insisted. "But you're of an interesting kind. That's something in your favor."

True to his promise to Keller, David planned to spend the following Saturday and Sunday at home. He hoped that a couple of quiet days with his mother would abate his agitation somewhat and enable him to take a calmer view of the matters that were pressing upon him for decision. He did not mean to take her wholly into his confidence just yet; he would not tell her of Margaret; that would only cause her distress, while effecting

nothing—there was nothing but uncertainty to lay before her. After the constant manner of self-reliant youth, he did not want to seek advice which might go contrary to his desires, unformed as those desires were; he wished first to get his plan of conduct clearly outlined, and then to have it approved. The most that he wanted now was a renewed assurance of his mother's faith in him.

He hoped, too, that there would be a chance to talk with Ruth, and that a way would open for letting her understand what was in his mind. It must come some time, and only when it was finally accomplished could he settle again to his work with real zest. But on Friday a letter came to him from Ruth, bringing him a half-conscious relief. Its tone was that of all the letters that had passed between them—a tone of generous warmth of understanding, with love taken for granted, running elusively between the lines, though its definite expression seemed by common consent to be held in abeyance against a possible day to come. The letter ran:

"DEAR DAVID,—Good-bye! There, doesn't that make you feel bad? Well, you deserve to suffer, you've been so dreadfully remiss yourself. It's three weeks, almost, since you've been here. And now you aren't going to see me for a long time—oh, ever and ever so long! Not until after New Year's! I'm going away to-night, back to my uncle's in Illinois, to be gone a whole month. And why, do you think? Because the doctor says I must. He says I'm tired and need a change. Isn't

that a good joke—big, healthy, busy Me ordered to take a rest, just like a common, lazy, rich person! But I'm going. It *has* been a hard year; harder than I realized until the work was all done and out of the way, and I had time to stop and think. I've had headaches and nerves for two weeks. Mother's going, too, and we're going to leave the place with a housekeeper. There, now, don't cry. I'll be back after a while, and in the mean time you can write to me, if you want to. Now here's the wagon for our trunks. Good-bye!

"RUTH.

"P.S.—Yes, there must be a 'P.S.,' of course. This is honest—real honest-true: I'm very sorry not to have a chance to see you and tell you how fine you are. Just to read about any man doing such a thing would have been good enough; but then to know that it was really and truly you, David! Now you'll just have to guess at the rest of what I'd like to say, for I'm not going to say it—not *now*. R."

This message seemed almost like a reprieve. It was not a pleasant task he must perform; not one to be coveted and hastened.

Free of that embarrassment, his visit home was happy and inspiriting. He was forced to take a new rôle among the people of the quiet neighborhood—the rôle of hero, because of his performance on that eventful night. With unfeigned modesty he sought to avert their awkward adulation; but it left a grateful flavor, nevertheless, and this was heightened when he saw his mother's frank, genuine pride in him—a pride in which Uncle Billy was a close sharer, though he affected to ridicule.

"'Mighty!" he scoffed. "I reckon now you'll be quittin' the law, won't you, an' goin' onto the stage? That's where all these here prize-fighters wind up. We'll be seein' your picture on the play-bills, an' you'll be comin' out on the platform in pink tights an' showin' 'em how you pitched in an' licked ten thousand men all to oncet, with one eye tied behind you. Our little Dave!"

After some futile remonstrance, David submitted and let them say what they liked, taking it all in good part, knowing so well what it meant. They were pleasant days.

His long-delayed talk with his mother was all that could have been desired. They sat together in the quiet of her room, after the late Sunday dinner, until the afternoon hours slipped into evening dusk, he rehearsing with irrepressible enthusiasm the story of his little achievements and bolder plans, holding back only one thing—the thing which, above all others, was nearest and greatest in interest, she placidly listening, putting in a gentle word now and then, but for the most part content with the mere fact of her motherhood and the present possession of a strong, good son. That was enough for her; better than any of the things upon which he dwelt so insistently. Out of her very silence he gained a new strength, a certainty that he would be equal to whatever was in store.

"Washington seems like it's a long ways off,"

she said, "but I don't want you to be afraid I'm going to mind that too much. I'll miss you, of course, but I'll know you're there; and, then, thinking about those you love always somehow makes them seem close. It's all right, son, and I'll be perfectly happy."

Wanting the stimulus of his campaign, Watson must have succumbed to his physical ailment, which weighed heavily upon him; but the consciousness of facing a large task sustained him through trying, weary days. His health was sadly broken, but his will was that of a born fighter and would not yield. Between the innate love of conflict and his acquired distrust of the men who were abetting him, he would delegate nothing to another which he could do for himself. Day after day he was at his desk, indefatigable, indomitable, meeting riff-raff and gentry turn about with a marvellous adroitness and power of adaptability, bending them to his purpose, and, like every true fighter, sustained less by the thought of approaching victory than by the lurking possibility of defeat. So long as there was a remote chance of defeat he took a savage delight in the struggle, but as the day approached for the assembling of the legislature he became curiously apathetic.

"It's too easy," he complained. "It's practically all over now, except the formal vote, and I haven't had half the fun I've paid for. There isn't a man in the contest with any real political

genius. They're a lot of dubs. I know what the matter is—I miss Bronson. I wish to Heaven he wasn't in jail. He's an infamous scoundrel and all that, but he certainly does play a stiff hand in politics, and that's the sort of fellow I like to have on the other side of the table. These other chaps know enough, but they lack nerve, and mere skill is no good in anything unless a man has the nerve to back it up. If murder was a bailable offence, I'd be glad to go on Bronson's bond just to get him out and have a good, swift scrap on my hands. As it is, I might as well be fighting a ladies' aid society."

So great was his assurance and so correspondingly small his interest that he even refrained altogether from attending upon the legislature. The details of organization aroused in him only a passive sort of curiosity, and upon the day fixed for the first ballot in the matter of the senatorship he was at his desk as usual, busy over a mass of papers in a new case.

In the middle of the afternoon a telegram was brought to him. He read it with no show of feeling beyond a short, mirthless laugh, then gave it to David.

"Congratulations," it said, succinctly. "We win with twenty-two votes to burn."

David's blood was less cool; he felt it rise to his cheeks and throb in his temples, and his laugh held all that Watson's had lacked.

"Well!" he said, heartily, his strong hand grasp-

ing Watson's shoulder. "How do you feel now, Senator? Won't you let me congratulate you, too? Now, don't you really think that's worth winning?"

Watson turned again to his desk, taking up the document he had been reading, slowly smoothing out the creases in the stiff paper.

"Oh, I guess so—maybe," he said. "That remains to be seen." He laid the paper down again, leaning back in his chair and raising his eyes to David's. "Yes; on the whole, I'm glad of it. It's the first thing I've really wanted in years that wasn't clear out of my reach. It 'll give me some hard work to do, anyway, and that's what I want. Besides, I'm really glad on your account. I've been thinking a lot about you, Boughton, and I shouldn't wonder if this would be good for you. You'll make a lot of friends among some big men —good, strong, human people — and, whatever comes afterwards, such friends won't be amiss. If you like, you can just consider it settled that you're going with me."

A messenger boy entered, laying another telegram before Watson, who tore open the envelope and glanced hastily at the yellow sheet, then read it over again slowly, and as though it required a distinct effort, the color fading from his face, his big hand shaking.

"Oh, good God, Boughton!" he cried. "This isn't for me. I didn't look. It's for you. Who is Dan? Isn't he your brother?"

He stretched out his hand and took David's into a firm clasp, holding it fast while David bent over his shoulder to read:

"Dan kicked by horse. Badly hurt. Can live but few hours. JOSEPH S. KELLER."

XXI

ALTHOUGH the year had clung tenaciously to the milder mood of autumn, prolonging it far beyond lawful seasonal bounds, as a man indulges himself in postponing an unpleasant duty, it had become resolved at last, and in the true prairie fashion had plunged headlong, though with a gasp and a shudder, into the cold depths of midwinter. It was a winter landscape through which David's train sped westward towards Waterloo in the gray end of the afternoon. Snow had begun to fall an hour before, driven by a rising wind; already the lower hollows were choked with it; the dead weed-clusters standing along the railway were gathering little mounds of white about their roots; and the uneven surfaces of the ploughed fields caught at their share, hiding it jealously in chinks and crannies among the clods—thrifty accumulations of treasure against the needs of later time. Over all a winter sky lowered close.

David's thoughts were in keeping with the prospect before his eyes—sombre, chilled, stiffened. They were without order; he had lost the will to arrange them and keep them in orderly

line; he had lost even the power to suffer their pain—for anguish bears always its own anodyne, blunting the susceptibility of the senses till they can endure. David was not anguished. A strange, heavy calm possessed him, oppressed him. One impression recurred again and again, like the beating of a sluggish pulse: Dan must die—might even now be dead—and the meanings and values of life must be changed.

Keller awaited him at Waterloo. A glance at the man's face sufficed.

"Oh, Joe!" he cried. "Am I too late?"

Keller made no attempt to soften the fact. "Yes, Dave; too late to see him alive. He died even before I got to town with my telegram. He lived less than an hour after he was hurt."

He drew his arm through David's, and they went out across the common to where a blanketed team stood in readiness. He kept silence through the hurried minutes of preparing for the drive; but when they were out upon the home-road he volunteered a quiet, further word:

"It's just as well. It wouldn't have done any good to get here sooner, except for your mother's sake. He wasn't conscious at all. The black mare kicked him on the back of the head, fracturing his skull, and then trampled him underfoot. He was beyond all help. But he didn't suffer at all, as he would if he'd been conscious."

"And what about mother?"

"She bears it well. She's a wonderfully brave

woman. You needn't be anxious about her. All she wants now is to have you at home."

At the end of the drive, David leaped from his seat and hurried up the long pathway through the snow-laden shrubbery, entering the hall, casting aside his coat, and kicking the snow from his feet. There was an ominous hush in the house, though many people were about, kindly neighbor-folk come to minister to fancied needs. One of these women came forward to meet him, but he hardly attended to her greeting.

"Where's mother?" he asked; and when the question was answered he ran up-stairs to his mother's room.

She was alone, lying upon her bed. With a great cry she arose and threw herself into his arms, clinging to him, hiding her face upon his breast.

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" It was a cry embracing the whole range of the mighty passion of motherhood — unfathomable joy in his living presence, unfathomable sorrow in the presence of death, with an unfathomable love over all. She raised her face to his; and then, as never before, he saw her wondrous strength. There was no least sign of bitterness; she seemed to know a depth of calm which no earthly bereavement could sound or disturb. Her lips were perfectly controlled; in her clear eyes was the lambent light he loved so well, not dimmed, but shining with a new radiance. Pain and grief and loss were there, but her faith was greater

than her agony; and as he met her look, something of her courage entered his own soul.

They sat down side by side, his arms about her, holding her close, while he pressed tender kisses upon her forehead, her eyes, and her lips, like an ardent lover; and she rested content as in a lover's embrace.

"Have you heard all about it, son?" she asked, by-and-by.

"Yes," he answered. "Joe told me how it happened — all I need to know. What is there for me to do? Have you made any plan yet?"

"We were just waiting for you," she returned, quietly. "There's not much to plan. I think we'll bury him to-morrow afternoon, with just a few of the neighbors in, so there'll be nobody to make us feel strange. Don't you think that's best? Of course we can't help there being some sorrow at a funeral; but I don't want to make any more show of it than has to be. I've been thinking it all over, lying here. If I could, I'd want to have it cheerful, like we thought we were only saying good-bye to him and sending him away to have a good time for a little while, till we can come, too. That's all it is, son." She took his big, strong hand between her own, caressing it, holding it against her breast. "That's all it is. I know it. The neighbors all know how we loved each other, and we won't have to pretend to the kind of sorrow we don't feel. Why, I don't believe I've cried a bit, and I don't

believe I'm going to. That isn't the way I feel. I think we'll just have Mr. Kennedy come in and talk to us a little, and that's all. I think that's enough, don't you?"

The usual simple routine of the household was not altered. The mother descended to the kitchen after a time, and, against the protests of the neighbor-women, helped to prepare supper, going about with her accustomed light, brisk step, and taking her own place at the head of the table. If there was any change from the spirit of other days, it was not in depression, but rather in a rare exaltation. Old Uncle Billy was even wrought to a high pitch of half-humorous appreciation of the event, and seemed to feel that he must contribute his part towards sustaining this wonderful spiritual effect.

"Say," he observed over his coffee-cup, "I don't believe the next world's goin' to be so mighty dif'rent from this 'n. I've had lots o' time to think about it, since I was young; an' I shouldn't wonder if we'd just wake up an' go on about our business pretty much like we been doin' here. Why shouldn't we? Ain't this good enough? If we don't, I know I'm goin' to be powerful homesick. I got so used to this. Come mornin' o' the Last Day, I ain't goin' to feel one speck to home unless I can go limpin' up sideways to'ards the throne, totin' a couple o' milk-buckets, an' set 'em down in the sink an' say to some o' the women-angels that's hangin' 'round,

'Now, gimme my breakfast, quick, before I got to go out an' 'tend to the horses.' I'd lots rather have it that way, too. I know I never could get used to loafin' an' havin' no chores. 'Twouldn't be me. An' Dan was a good deal that way, too. Yes, sir; I reckon we're goin' to be happy there pretty much the same way we are here, except mebbe a man 'll know better how to do his part."

At a later hour, when the kitchen had been made tidy for the night, and the neighbors had gone to their homes, David and his mother stood together beside the dead.

"We'll tell him our good-bye to-night, just us two," she had said. "It 'll seem more natural, somehow, and not so much like anything but good-night, because he was alive this morning."

The young body was splendidly stalwart in bulk and line, just as in life. There was a deep, wholesome tan upon the face, concealing death's pallor; and death had wrought no change in the fine, strong set of the features. In the man who lives out-of-doors, close to the heart of the world, and in league with it, the change from life to death is not great; it seems not a catastrophe, a terrible break in the divinely ordered harmony, but only a passing note, holding in suspension deeper and broader harmonies yet to be sounded. Death had touched this face; but the touch had been kindly, softening, and nothing more.

The mother stood looking upon it long and tranquilly, her hands loosely folded before her,

her own face unimpassioned; then at last she bent and kissed the still lips. At the touch a ragged sigh escaped her, that deepened into a moan.

"Just one tear for my boy—my man-child!" she sobbed; and then the tears came in a strong, warm, living flood. She knelt and wept without restraint. When the passion was over, David raised her to her feet and dried her eyes as though he were caring for a child.

"I didn't mean to give way," she said. "It was weak, maybe; but he was my first-born. You don't know what that means—no man does, or can. It's the very first sign that Heaven gives to a woman that her own mission in the world is to be fulfilled. It's a different feeling, somehow, from every other. That was what made me cry; it wasn't just because I was weak." She smiled bravely up into his troubled eyes. "That's all. I'll not do it any more. We'll go to bed now, son, and rest up for to-morrow."

"Go thy way; thy son liveth." So spoke the village preacher to the listening soul of the mother. He made but a poor figure, standing by the window in the full afternoon light; shabby, awkward, grown old before his time, made almost abject by long uncertainty of himself and his work; he was not a man to be picked from a crowd as a chosen messenger of God. In the

first few moments his habitual timidity weighed heavily upon him, so that he halted and stumbled in his slurring speech, as he faced the people and felt that they were appraising him, in old human fashion taking account of his manner and words rather than of his thought. Then his eyes encountered the mother-eyes and held to them; his drooping shoulders lifted, and he spoke steadfastly to her alone.

"Go thy way; thy son liveth. We call death a sad mystery, because we cannot understand; yet it is no more a mystery than life. The mystery is not in life or in death, for these are familiar facts, but in the purpose of Him who ordains both. To that we are blind, save as we have faith that it is wise and good. He has His plan, and He carries it out, while we laugh and weep. If we could see the end, no doubt we should see that we have laughed and wept always at the wrong times; but if He meant us to see, we should not be blind. He sees, and is not that enough? Death, no less than life, is a part of His plan, and therefore wise and good and beautiful. Yesterday we said that this man lived; in his vigorous youth he seemed so much alive that he made us share in his joy of life. To-day we call him dead, sorrowing because his death seems to us untimely, the promise of his youth and strength unredeemed. Yet it came to pass at the appointed time. Not one of us can ever say with certainty of his life and work, it is

finished. To us the death of any man seems untimely while he has strength and purpose and the will to work. But the task God has set for us He will let us do, and death is His sign that it is done. It is all included in His design, and there are no accidents, and nothing goes wrong. Believing this, we need fear neither life nor death. We live but to die: that is only a half-truth. The rest of it is that we die but to live again. In the beginning was life, and the end shall be life; for God, the soul of all, is not dead, but living. 'I am the resurrection and the life.' 'Let not your heart be troubled.' Sometime, somewhere, somehow, we shall know. 'If it were not so, I would have told you.' Go thy way, dear mother of the dead; thy son liveth!"

In the evening of that day David and his mother sat long together before an open fire in the sitting-room at home, borrowing of its cheer and talking calmly of many things.

"There need be no break in your plans, David," she said. "I want you to keep on with them. Dan was a farmer; he liked the farm and would have kept it up, and while he lived I felt that way, too—I suppose because this had been home so long. But now it's different, and there's no reason why you should go on with it. I know you'll consider me; but the best way to do that is just to consider your own wishes. I shall be happy anywhere, if I know you're doing what

you most want, and I couldn't be happy otherwise. I mean just that, son."

The speech touched the vital centre of his thoughts. He had wondered what she would say, and he listened intently. Yet when it was said, and the chance was his, he did not feel the elation he had expected. She would not stand in his way; but did he want her to get out of his way? In spite of her assurance, he knew where her greatest happiness lay. Long afterwards he was glad to remember that his answer came at once and without reserve.

"I'm going to stay right here with you, mother, for a while. This is where I seem to belong just now, more than anywhere else. There's no hurry, even if I decide that I want to stick to the law. We'll just live along here, and I'll run the farm in Dan's place till we see what comes. That's settled. Now don't you fret about me. I'm not giving up anything; there's lots of time."

And, indeed, after the stress and strain of the eventful weeks preceding, his return to the labor of the farm promised a vast relief. Here at least were no complexities, no puzzles; here at least the day's motives and the day's work were plain.

He had one long talk with Watson, explaining the new obligations that were laid upon him. He did not speak of a final surrender of his plan, but only of letting it lie in abatement for a time, until conditions might be adjusted and he could take it up again without fear of the emotional complica-

tions that would be likely to follow a neglect of obvious present duty; and Watson heartily approved.

"The place is yours when you're ready," he said; "so take your own time. You've chosen the right course, and you can take my word for it that you won't be sorry."

David collected his few belongings from the office and his boarding-house, and when that was done he went in some trepidation to say good-bye to Margaret; but she was gone out for the day, and he returned to Waterloo without seeing her. It was better so, he told himself. In his relaxed condition of mind, he was perfectly willing to let the whole matter rest until he should have time to collect himself. He was even a little curious to try the experiment of separation from her, to see what it would effect. Already he felt a quieting of the long, passionate tumult. It was not a reaction, a lessening of desire, but only a lull, a longer look forward, and a subjugation of his madness of impatience. He wrote to her once—a boyish letter, though its expressions of feeling were studiously moderate—and she replied in a letter that was to him a more complete revelation of herself than any she had ever given—sympathetic, hopeful, inspiriting, seeming like a distinct message from one who had been ordained to sustain an intimate relation to his destiny. It left him with no shadow of doubt as to his attitude towards her. Whatever the hinderances of the moment,

whatever the lagging progress of events to come, he loved her. Of that he was very sure.

The days passed quickly enough. There were no large tasks, but only a multitude of little things to be done, after the manner of the thrifty farmer in midwinter, making ready for the coming season in the fields. Uncle Billy was his only helper; they, with the mother, made up the household in those days, and their life was simple, almost elemental. David was a good worker, and he pursued his work with vigor, as though aware that purposeful bodily labor would be, as it has always been, a preventive and a cure of mental distresses. And so he found it. As the days passed, each bearing its own reward of definite accomplishment by his hands, he felt only an increasing assurance, a truer reliance upon the belief that human life and conduct rest at bottom upon solid foundations. His energy seemed inexhaustible. In the first gray light of every dawn, long before the older folk were astir in the house, he was about his work in yard or barn or shed, mending the broken fences, cleaning the rusted machinery, caring for the stock, or, when all else failed, swinging his axe lustily upon the great pile of firewood, finding a supreme satisfaction in every sturdy movement. The last fading light of every evening found him reluctant to stop; and when he would go to bed, his strong muscles cloyed with the delight of day-long exercise, still he felt no weariness of mind. Those night hours were the

best of all, when he lay looking out through the window beside his bed at the little square of sky beyond, where the brilliant stars seemed so close as to be caught and held like quivering live things in the light net-work of the bare elm branches. Then, as at no other time, he had no secrets from himself; then, in the delicious interval between waking and sleeping, he cherished thought of Margaret.

Ruth was at home again, and he saw her occasionally on the long Sunday afternoons. He might not have told the reason for his visits, but there seemed to be no reason against them. He had given up for the present the intention of taking her into his confidence concerning Margaret. That must wait with all the rest. They were almost never alone; the care of the swarming children and the obligations of housekeeping pressed upon her. They met in a spirit which demanded no privacy—the spirit of generous comradeship. There was no outward sign of change from the tacit understanding of an earlier time. He realized—he had never failed to realize—the exquisite grace and sweetness of her womanhood, and she was very dear to him now, as always. The change that had come was not to be expressed in outward signs; it was too intangible for any expression, too elusive to be seized upon save by the incommunicable processes of intuition. But, though they spoke no word about it, he knew that she felt it, and he dimly wondered how she would

explain it to herself — whether she divined the truth, or was content to charge his altered mood to the sharply altered conditions of his life. Though he had a recurring sense of obligation, almost of guilt, he let the matter rest for the time without attempting to justify himself. When their meetings came he welcomed them, finding in her companionship a solace, a restfulness, that defied analysis, though it was sure. And between times he worked with all his might.

Two months were sped, and the life behind the lowered curtain of winter was softly tuning for the overture of spring—faint, far sounds, audible to the soul rather than to the ear; sounds of the first stir of sap rising in the trees, of the first least swelling of the buds in their coverings, of the first quickening beneath the last year's mantle of decaying mould. That is the time when every sleeping thing, though with eyes still closed, breathes a long, deep, awakening sigh. Walls shut out the sound, but the out-door man hears and understands and responds.

XXII

ONE night in early March David walked through the lane that led from the upper hills to the deep hollow of the valley. The day's work had been unusually hard, but at its end he felt in every fibre of his body a resilience superior to any fatigue. He knew its meaning—knew that spring was on the way. Snow still lay heaped on the northern side of trees and fences, but, though it was long past sunset, at the sides of the lane tiny rivulets ran down to the Elkhorn, chuckling in happy undertone. The night wind, laden with earthy odors, was warm upon his cheek.

He paused at the yard gate, leaning lightly upon it, looking away across the shadowy sweep of the landscape, not attending closely to what he saw, but rather to what was going on within himself, feeling the swifter movement of his blood and the reawakening of the dormant impulses of his youth, ordained since the beginning to come with the bourgeoning of the new year. Undefined at first, his thoughts soon centred upon Margaret, and he let them have free way, checking nothing, hiding nothing. In those few moments he grew determined. He would wait no longer. If she loved

him, as he dared to hope, one time was as good as another for the confession; and at least he was resolved to tell her of his own love without more delay.

He went to Omaha early the next morning. His first thought had been to go straightway to Margaret; but afterwards he had concluded that he would first talk with her father. With that intention, he hurried from the station to Watson's office.

Watson was in his private room, pacing the floor, his big face suffused with the flush of strong mental agitation. His walk ceased as David entered, and he offered his hand warmly, though his spoken greeting was abrupt, even harsh.

"Hello, Boughton! What are you here for? You haven't been summoned on the Bronson case, have you? Haven't you heard what's happened?"

"I came to see you," David answered. "No, I don't know anything about the Bronson case. Is it on trial?"

Watson raised himself to his full height, a tower of wrath, his eyes blazing.

"You haven't heard, then? What do you think? That hellion goes scot-free! Now doesn't that beat the devil and all his imps? Here, look at this!"

He stepped to his desk, spreading out the sheets of a morning paper, beating them flat with smashing blows of his broad hand, pointing to the bold

head-lines over the news-columns on the first page:

STATE AGAINST BRONSON

JURY DIRECTED TO ACQUIT

Fatal Error on Part of County Attorney in Conduct of Case.—Murderer of Martin Akin Regains His Liberty Through an Accident to the Machinery of Justice.

David read with attention alert, Watson standing over him, breathing hard, puffing in his excitement.

"Accident!" he bellowed. "Accident! Do you suppose the people can be made to believe that?"

"What was it, then?" David asked. "Wasn't it an accident?"

"What was it?" Watson shouted. "Can't you see what it was without being told? Have you lost your mind? Politics! That's what it was! Why, it's so plain that a child could see it. That prosecutor has played the villain, that's all. He's paid a political debt by sacrificing his official honor—made an intentional botch of the thing. We might have known he would, if we'd stopped to consider. Where we blundered was in not getting somebody to take the case with him and watch him."

"But I don't understand," David said, as indeed he did not.

"Why, you infant!" Watson retorted, hotly. "That county attorney is one of Bronson's puppets. Bronson put him in office, and he held his office by Bronson's sufferance alone. Isn't it plain enough? But do you think the people will stand for that? No, by Heaven! not while I live. I'll see that the pair of them get what's coming to them, if I spend the rest of my life at it."

He threw the paper to the floor, ground it under his heel, spat upon it in the excess of his rage. "That's politics!" he thundered. "That's the sanctity of the institutions we boast about!"

He struck again into his rolling walk, swinging his arms aloft, then flung himself into his chair.

"Boughton, I swear I'm almost ready to believe that honor amongst the general run of men is pure fiction. I know it's all but an obsolete word in the vocabulary of politics. It's archaic—lugged out and paraded on the stump occasionally, without the slightest notion of what it means. And the curse of it is that the people don't seem to care. They grin at official dishonor as though it were a smart accomplishment. The chances are that unless some fool like me takes hold of this business, six months from now that outlaw Bronson can have anything he wants that's within the power of the people of Omaha to give. It's happened before, a score of times, and it 'll happen again, and keep on happening, just so long as the functions of government are left in the hands of moral idiots."

He shook himself, as though his temper could be thus cast off, and his outburst died away in a choking growl in the depths of his throat.

"Well, let it go. We'll attend to that later. I'm mighty glad to see you, Boughton. I've been wondering this long time how things were going with you. All right? Have you made up your mind to come back here again so soon?"

David had cared very little for the other theme. Great as it was, it seemed very impersonal and unimportant in comparison with his own present purpose. He was impatient to declare himself, and he struck straightway into what he had to say.

"No, I can't come back yet. I must stay with mother for a while. I came down just for to-day to talk to you—not about my work, but about something else. There's no use in mincing matters. I want to tell you that I love your daughter, and I want you to consent that I may ask her to be my wife."

Watson sat dumfounded, his lips parted, his eyes staring. For many seconds not a nerve moved. The blood fled from his face, leaving it overcast with a gray pallor, then came surging back in a full, red flood, swelling the veins into cords and bringing big drops of sweat to his forehead.

"Oh, good God, Boughton! What are you saying? No, no, no, no!" The words swelled into a cry, vibrant with pain, and the heavy features were convulsed, tortured.

David saw and beheld in utter amazement. He had thought to arouse surprise, but here was passion such as he had never seen—a very agony.

"Yes," he said, in simple insistence. "I don't see why it affects you so. Have you never thought that it might be true?"

Watson did not answer; he only sat as if stunned—staring, staring.

"It is true," David went on. "Does it hurt you so much to know it? I hoped you wouldn't feel so. I do love her, and I'm ready to spend my life for her happiness. You know what kind of man I am. I'm not rich nor great, but I shall make my way and maybe be both by-and-by, if I can have her to help me—if you'll trust her to me."

"Trust her to you?" Watson echoed, dully. "Boughton, have you told her this?"

"No," David answered, simply. "I think she's seen—I hope she has—but I've never told her outright."

"Thank God!" Watson breathed, fervently. "For God's sake, and for your own sake, and for my sake, don't do it! You *must* not!"

There was a long silence. "You mean that you won't give your consent?" David asked, at last.

"Consent? Not while I've got breath enough left to say no. Not in this world!" And David saw that he meant it. The full power of his great will shone in his deep eyes and was expressed in every burly line of his body.

"WATSON DID NOT ANSWER; HE ONLY SAT AS IF STUNNED"

"Will you tell me why?" David questioned, wretchedly. "I'd never suspected that you had anything against me, and I'd like to know what it is, if you're willing to tell me."

"Against *you!*" Watson exploded. "What have I against you?" In strange contrast with his mood of a moment before, he broke into a laugh that shook the room. "Oh, you poor, blind boy! Be quiet a minute now, and look at me, and listen. Why, Boughton, I thought I was clear past being shocked like this. For the life of me, I can't see how you've managed to conceive such an idea. It's so utterly absurd and grotesque and ridiculous. Make her your wife! Why, what in the name of— Oh, what *is* the matter with you?"

"I want her for my wife just because I love her," David replied, stoutly, determined now to stand his ground to the end. "Is that really so hard for you to believe? I tell you I do love her. That ought to explain it."

"Oh—love!" The exclamation was not one of mere impatience or scorn or anger, yet it held all three, and more, in its accents of extreme repugnance. "Maybe you do. It's possible. But to think of marrying her—that's what gets me. I can't understand it. You don't know her —you can't! Why, my dear boy, listen! It 'll sound cruel, most likely, but she's not fit to be your wife. In the first place, she wouldn't marry you. You're not the kind of man she's looking

for; you couldn't give her a hundredth part of what she'll demand of her husband, when she gets him. And even if it were conceivable that she would marry you, your life would be hell-tormented."

David raised his hand in impetuous expostulation, and his lips parted; but Watson cut him short imperatively.

"You must let me say it. I know her just for what she is. I'm her father; but she's her mother's daughter; and you know what it costs me to say that. I'll say it all while I'm about it—for your sake; and then we'll bury it and forget it forever. She's one of the sort of women who ruin men like you. Her mother ruined me; and when I was young I wasn't so very different from you. If she were to marry you, she'd turn your life into a waste—a dreary, desolate waste. That's the best you could hope for, after you'd got to know her, and you'd be almighty lucky if you didn't fare infinitely worse. Good God! Don't I know?"

David could contain himself no longer. "I don't believe it!" he cried. "I know better! I won't hear you say that of her. I didn't think you were capable of saying it."

"It's true!" Watson thundered, and brought his clinched fist down in a mighty blow upon the desk. "Don't tell me I don't know her! I know every impulse of her selfish, false soul. A-h-h!"

The word was a shuddering groan. He struggled to his feet, his face drawn with terror, his eyes starting, fixed upon the doorway that led to the outer room. "Martha!" he gasped. His hands groped feebly here and there for support, but they caught only the air, and he sank slowly, heavily to his knees, hiding his face in his arms.

A woman stood just within the door — a woman poorly clad, gray, haggard. Her face was the face of Margaret grown old and marked by nameless suffering.

XXIII

WATSON knelt, the huge mass of his body cowering, his head fallen against the deep cushions of his chair, his face hidden in his hands. There was no sound in the room save a jumble of faint echoes rising from the street far below. The woman's appearance, coming unheralded at that moment of passionate excitement, had snapped the tense thread and left both men unnerved.

She was the first to move. With slow, halting step, as though fighting her way, and conquering little by little, with painful difficulty, she passed to Watson's side and stood looking down upon him for a long time.

"Paul," she said at last, very quietly—a quiet that was not restraint but a struggle against a low ebb of the will to speak. It was such a voice as must have come from her white, drawn lips. She put out her hand and touched his shoulder lightly with the very tips of her fingers. "Paul," she said again.

At the touch he shrunk away — seemed to shrink within himself, as though withdrawing to a safe retreat; and from that retreat he sent out no sign.

"Paul," she said for the third time, in the same lifeless accents. Slowly, every movement a combat, she sank to her knees upon the floor, keeping a little distance between them, and crouching like an abject dog that dreads the lash. She did not offer to touch him again; her hands lay loosely clasped in her lap; even her glance was turned from him, not to offend by too great temerity. She betrayed no semblance of any feeling but that of one who has met complete defeat and made complete surrender.

"I've come back, Paul," she said, in level-toned insistence. "You're not glad to see me. I knew you wouldn't be — couldn't be; but I've come back to you. I couldn't stay away any longer, or I shouldn't have come. I had to come. You needn't be afraid of me. I'm not going to harm you any more. I think I've done you all the harm I can. I didn't come to ask you to forgive me, or to take me back. I know you couldn't do that, and I couldn't ask it. But I must make you understand me. You don't understand me now, Paul."

She raised her lowered eyes and looked at him long and earnestly; and as her glance rested upon his bent head and drooping figure there came to her face its first token of awakening from its spiritless impassivity. It was as though, starved, she beheld food lying just beyond her reach.

"Paul," she said yet again, "you won't believe me unless you look at me. Please look at me!

You used to know when I lied to you. If you look at me now you will know that I have come to tell you the truth."

Slowly he raised his head, and for an instant their eyes met; then without a word he sank into his former attitude. She could not have gained much encouragement from his look, for her voice did not vary from its lethargy.

"It will be seven years next Thursday," she said. "Seven years. I wonder if you have kept count as well as that. I don't believe you have. It isn't a man's way. A man would sooner forget. But I've remembered, every day and every day. It has taken me seven awful years to get the strength to do this. I've meant all the time to do it, when I should be strong enough. And now you must listen to me. I don't even ask you to believe me, Paul—not yet. I'll *make* you believe, if you'll only listen."

Neither had heeded David, who had kept his seat, a fascinated witness. Suddenly he recovered himself and arose, moving quietly towards the door. At the sound of his footfall Watson looked up, then struggled heavily to his feet.

"For God's sake, Boughton," he cried, "don't go! You must stay with me. I can't bear this alone." And when David had resumed his seat, he sank back into his own chair, his wife keeping her posture on the floor before him. He regarded her with a shudder of loathing, but he kept his

eyes fixed upon her face while she went on with what she had to say.

"Hate me! hate me!" she said. "I've earned your hate, God knows, and I don't deny you the right to make me feel it. But you can listen, in spite of that, and I don't ask anything more. All these seven years I knew what you must be thinking, when you thought about me at all. My death would have been a pleasant memory to you beside that thought. I made up my mind to kill myself once, so that you needn't be tormented any longer by your thoughts of me—the thoughts I knew you had. But then I changed my mind. I wanted to live until I could bring myself to do what I'm doing now—until I could come back and make you believe that the things you've been thinking weren't true at all. You can tell if I speak the truth, Paul. Listen! Except in the very hour of going away, I have been true to you. When I went away I was thinking horrible things —meaning to do horrible things; but I didn't do them. As God hears me, since you saw me last I've done nothing—nothing that I can't tell you without shame, except that I did go away from you. That's all there is to give me shame. I left him—*him*, before half an hour—before we had crossed the river, and I haven't seen him since, not once. Every day of these seven years I've been a pure woman. Oh, Paul! Paul! It's true —it's true!"

With a cry of passionate appeal she threw her-

self upon him, clinging to him, her arms about his knees, her face bent upon them. But with his great strength he shook her off, pushing her away roughly, so that she fell at her length upon the floor. She lay as she had fallen, making no attempt to rise, her face hidden, her poor body shaken with the stress of her gasping breathing.

Watson walked the floor with his giant's stride, back and forth, back and forth, keeping as far from her as the width of the room would allow, suffering the throes of a mighty agony. David, watching both, pitied both with all his soul; but for some undiscoverable reason his feeling for the man was greater than that for the woman.

Watson paused at last, regarding his wife from a distance with eyes unyielding.

"I believe you lie," he said, with slow emphasis. "I have known you too well to believe anything else."

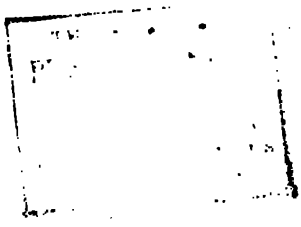
She made no response by word or movement, and he took up his walk again, holding away from her. His big face had become as a mask of stone, its every line fixed and rigid. But little by little its rigidity gave way, fused by the heat of his passion, and once again his walk stopped.

"How have you lived?" he demanded, abruptly.

She arose from the floor, removing her worn black gloves and stretching her hands towards him. There was an infinite pathos in the gesture.

"See!" she said. "I have worked — worked hard. At least you can believe that, for there are

"'I BELIEVE YOU LIE,' HE SAID, WITH SLOW EMPHASIS"



the marks. Every hour of every day is open to you. I am ashamed of nothing. I sold books at first; and then I sewed; and then I got work in a laundry, helping the book-keeper; and for two years I've been a kitchen-servant in a restaurant. I had to live, and I took what I could get to do. I'm proud of that part. I've earned my living honestly, and it's been enough. You can believe that! Those aren't the hands you knew; they're rough and hard. Feel!"

But he caught his hands together behind him, turning away.

"Paul," she repeated, "I don't ask you to forgive me. I don't ask anything for myself—only that you will believe me. All I've been living for has been to come and tell you this. When I see that you believe, I shall go away again and never trouble you any more. Is it too much to believe? Don't you want to believe it, Paul — that I've kept myself pure? Would you believe it if you could?"

She drew close to him, plucking at his sleeve, thrusting herself before him, striving to compel him; but once again he freed himself, pushing her aside.

"Don't touch me!" he commanded. Then he flashed out bitterly, savagely: "Why did you come to me with this? What was the need of it? Even if this wretched story were true, you would better have stayed away. Your coming here can do only harm, by starting fresh tortures and

quickening a scandal that would be better dead. You could have played your part from a distance just as well, if you have stated your real purpose. I don't believe you have. There's something back of it all. You dare not tell me just why you came."

She faced him with a supreme courage. "Would you like to know why I came?" she asked. "My true reason—shall I give it to you?"

"You needn't say it," he returned, harshly. "I know it better than you can tell me. You've heard that I'm going to the Senate, and you want your share of the glory."

She did not flinch under the cruelty of the imputation. "I had heard of that, and was glad," she said; "but that is not why I have come. I came because I could not endure my life any longer without seeing you face to face and telling you the truth with my own lips. But that was only a part of my reason. I meant to say only so much, and then to leave you when I saw that you believed me. I should have gone away happy if I had seen that. But now I can't stop with that alone. You compel me to go on, after what you have said. Believe it or not, as you will. I came because I love you, Paul. It was love that brought me. I love you!"

"God!" he breathed—a prolonged whisper, half a sigh and half a groan. "Oh, my God! Have you no pity?" Again she drew towards him; but he retreated to the wall, setting his back against

it, throwing out his hands to ward her off. "Keep away!" he gasped. "Don't touch me!"

Obediently she stood back, but opening her arms to him, inviting him, her sad face glorified as only love can glorify.

"I love you!" she repeated, with a quiet exultation. "I have loved you all the time — from the very day I left you, when I began to think of what I had brought upon you. I never had known before what my love for you was; but I knew then. I denied it to myself at first, because I was weak and proud; but I knew it was true, and it has been growing truer and truer every day. I fought as long as I could, and when I could fight no more, I came. You were always a just man!" she cried. "You weren't always generous in all things with me, nor gentle, nor sympathetic; but you were always just, at least. I don't believe you could be less than just to any one, and that's all I ask for myself. Paul, you dare not be unjust to me now. I have done you a terrible wrong; but I have suffered more than you, knowing how you must hate me, though I loved you with all my soul. I do love you, and I shall stay here until I make you believe it. I want nothing else of you; but you must believe!"

His hot eyes had been fixed upon hers while she spoke, searching them, piercing through to what lay behind. When she had finished, he stood with his chin sunk upon his breast, his arms hanging, in the lax attitude of a fighter who, having

fought to the utmost, can no longer sustain his defence, and awaits the last blow, only his will unconquered.

"Go away, Martha!" he pleaded. "Go away for a little while! I can't talk to you now. You must give me a chance to think."

Without further word she turned from him and left the room; but her step was the step of a victor, not that of one vanquished.

In those few minutes Watson seemed to have aged by a score of years. The flesh of his full face hung in flaccid folds; there was a burden of age upon his stooped shoulders, and his walk, as he shuffled slowly towards his chair, was that of an infirm old man. His eyes met David's, and David saw that their accustomed fire had died out, leaving them lustreless, expressive of nothing but an uncomprehending wonder.

"Well, Boughton," he said, feebly, with a faint, unmeaning smile. "What do you make of this, anyway? It's a great day for both of us, isn't it?"

David's own trouble had vanished before this other, so infinitely greater; recalled to him thus, it seemed not very portentous, and he did not dwell upon it; his strongest feeling was one of profound compassion for the broken man before him.

"I wish I knew what to say to you, Mr. Watson," he ventured.

"Yes," Watson returned, with only an impersonal interest. "Yes, I wish so, too. What do

you think? You're unprejudiced. Is she playing fair with me?"

"I believe she told you the truth," David answered, simply, earnestly.

"Do you? Do you, really?" Watson questioned. "Well, you can't tell. It would be a great comfort to me to think so. She spoke as though I might have forgotten her — you heard how she said it. But I haven't. I've tried to forget, but I couldn't help remembering; and especially of late I've been thinking a lot about her, wondering about her. I loved her once, sure enough, and a man can't easily get over those memories of love. She touched me in a raw place when she spoke of love. You can't guess, and no more could she, how much I've wanted her lately, since—since I've won some of the things we planned for together when we were young. It seems like an irony of fate that I didn't win much of anything while I had her, and then found it easy to win after I'd lost her. I guess it was because I was suspicious that she wanted me to win so that some selfish vanity of hers might be gratified, and I stubbornly wouldn't do it. I thought she wasn't satisfied with me, and it made me meanly jealous. I know that was so. We split on that, and began to drift apart, and I pretended I didn't care. I simply couldn't drive myself to show what I really felt. God knows I did care; but I wouldn't have let her see it for the world. Then when she was gone, I set myself to gain what I thought she'd

coveted, out of sheer perversity; and all the time it was bitter as hell to me. God knows I did care. God only knows how I've missed her. And now she's come, and I don't know what to do."

His voice was thin, worn, tight with pain. In the extremity of his weakness a tear crept out on his cheek and fell upon his hand. He lifted his hand, regarding the glistening drop with listless curiosity for a moment before brushing it away.

"Yes," he said again, "it would comfort me mightily to think so." Then, with almost childish eagerness: "Why, Boughton, I'd give my hope of eternal life if I could be sure of her for one single hour. I haven't been sure of anything for so long, I'd count it a good bargain. One hour of certainty would be worth it to me just now."

He passed his hand wearily across his eyes, as though he would brush away a troublesome mist. "Boughton," he said, "I hope you won't mind if I ask you to leave me alone for a while. You can't help me, not a bit; and I must have time to think this thing out for myself."

He clung to the boy's hand in parting, seeming to draw strength from it. "I'm much perplexed," he confessed; "but I'll try to think of you, too, and what you told me. I don't know. Maybe we can see our way out yet."

XXIV

DAVID went away feeling that his own hope had been worse than aborted—that it had been misbegotten. As he contemplated it now, with what courage he could summon, and in the light of what had just passed, it seemed to have fallen altogether shapeless, with all vitality gone out of it. That it could rise again to life was past belief. Nothing remained but to abandon it and to let it go the way of the dead. His first instinct was to go back to his home—to drop safely back to his level and to keep to it. To his disturbed vision even the fact of his love, that had shone so steadfast and so golden a few hours before, appeared as only a spectral shape, looming dimly beyond his reach, and ready to fade altogether if he would try to draw near to it. The first train for home would leave in half an hour. He was quite ready to let it carry him back to his fields and away from these intolerable illusions of a distempered fancy.

But that was not to be. On the street the human stream, that had flowed slenderly through the morning hours, had been swelled to thrice its volume by the noontime discharge from offices and shops, and was moving like a sudden freshet.

He plunged into it, making his way towards the station, heedless of the rude jostling, thinking only of escape.

Presently he was dimly aware that his name had been spoken near by; but it did not arouse him. The call was repeated, and when he looked around he saw a neat trap drawn up to the curb, moving along in time with his walk. Upon the high seat was Margaret, bending towards him with a smile, her small, gloved hand extended; and he knew that he was not yet free.

"It's too bad to break in upon such abstraction," she said, in light raillery; "but it's so long since I've seen you that I couldn't miss the chance of saying how do you do, at least."

He took her hand and held it, without speaking, his grasp tightening, until she gently released herself and moved to the farther end of the seat.

"Are you really so much engrossed?" she asked, brightly. "Are you too busy to come with me for a little while? It's too fine a day by half to be spent in-doors. I'm going to drive for an hour or so before luncheon; and then I'll let you lunch with me, if you like, and we can talk. I want to know all about what you've been doing. Come!"

He climbed into the place she made for him at her side, and she turned her horse up the hill and into an asphalted side street that stretched its level length northward. For a time talking was impossible. The horse was a spirited animal, fresh from the stable and full of a lusty desire for

motion, and not to be curbed at once. Margaret was an excellent horsewoman. She let the beast have his head, giving herself up to the exhilaration of his speed, every muscle of her lithe body responsive, while David sat with his glance intent upon her beautiful face, seeing the warm color rising to her cheeks and the quickening glow of youth and health in her wonderful eyes. He did not want to talk; he did not try to think what he would say when the time came. To be in her presence, to be brought again into a living contact, with susceptibilities rendered more than ever acute by the long separation, and now more than ever satisfied by what they fed upon, that was enough. Everything else he was able to cast aside and forget — the painful scenes of the morning; Watson's furious outburst concerning the girl; his own despairing irresolution—that seemed the least real of all.

By the time the horse had spent his excess spirit and had settled to a soberer gait, they had passed from the town streets and out upon a broad, winding boulevard that ran along the summit of the wooded bluffs overlooking the river. There Margaret passed the reins into David's hands.

"Now, you may have him," she said. "I always hold on until he gives up, no matter how long it takes; but when he has given up, it isn't interesting any more. I suppose that's merely human nature, isn't it? I'm always glad to have some one along to drive for me after that; and I'm

extra glad it happens to be you to-day, because I've been wondering about you for so long—what you were doing and thinking; and now you can tell me while I rest. I'm perfectly willing to rest, too. Don't you think he's an unusually strong animal? Now, tell me: have you come back to stay?"

"No; not yet," he answered. "I had an errand in town to-day. I begin to be afraid I can never come back to stay."

"Oh!" she said, with ready sympathy. "Oh, that would be a pity, after the splendid beginning you've made! I hope it will turn out better than that."

He was not inclined to take up the discussion at once. Rather needlessly he devoted his attention to the horse for a time, looking straight ahead, while the girl covertly observed him, noting the firm, square set of his shoulders and the evident restraint upon his face.

"I hope nothing has gone wrong," she ventured, at last.

"I don't know," he returned. "Before I met you back there in town, everything seemed to have gone wrong—everything. But now I'm not so sure. I wish I could be sure."

She gave him another scrutiny, quicker, keener than before, and fully comprehending, though she feigned to let his meaning escape her. She was more learned than he in the art of feigning. She did not try to turn aside his evident intention, as

perhaps she might have done even then; for an end of her own she invited him to go on.

"Is it anything you can tell me?" she asked, gently.

"Yes," he answered, with resolution. "It is something I must tell you, and you must let me say it. It has been put off too long as it is. I've never been a man to put off things that I thought ought to be said, when I was sure of my right to say them; and this is one of them. You must let me speak."

She was entirely composed; and in that statuesque serenity she was always most lovely to his eyes. "Yes," she said, "I think I may let you say what is to be said. I think it is better that we understand each other."

He flashed upon her a look of intensest eagerness, striving to read her; but that he could not do. He thought to find her agitated, remembering other occasions when confession was less imminent than now, and when she had been apparently unable to conceal the evidences of feeling. But that mood was not in control to-day; whatever she felt was well hidden beneath an unperturbed exterior. She averted her face, looking away across the valley, waiting for what was to come, and there was nothing left for him but to find his way as he could.

"I think you can guess what it is," he said. "It began a long time ago—the very first time we met, and it has been growing ever since. I ought to

have told you before; it would have saved a lot of trouble. But there were a great many things I had to think about first—my own fitness to tell you, and my fitness for what might come afterwards. It seemed very strange. I'd never doubted my fitness for anything, before this. I'd always thought I was fit for anything I could win. But this was different. I had to think about myself in a new way. Before I came down to Omaha and met you, I'd never been anything but a farmer—just a plain, honest, simple-minded farmer. You and your life, and everything that belonged to you, were wholly new to me. You made me think. We hardly seemed to belong to the same world then, until I got to know you better, and knew how I really felt towards you. Then it seemed to me that we had always belonged together, and always must, in spite of all the differences in our lives. After that I don't know what held me back from telling you, unless it was that I wanted to have something more to offer you than just myself. I'm sorry I ever thought of that at all, because I feel sure it can't make any great difference. I know it can't, if you feel anything as I do, because then you can see that our differences don't go very deep, after all. Underneath the differences, we're alike; we're both young and strong and honest. Those are the things that lie at the bottom of life, and the other things are put on and false—position, I mean, and all that. I've thought it all out during these

months, and I know that whatever my position might be, or yours, high or low, loving you as I do, I'd be bound to tell you. There!" he cried, almost fiercely, inspired and strengthened by the mere fact of having made a brave beginning, and carried on by sheer momentum. "Now you know, and there's no more chance for mistake. I love you, as, I think, none but an honest man can love a woman like you."

Swept and mastered by his feeling he bent towards her, stooping to catch a glimpse of her face. She had sat quite still throughout his declaration, without looking at him; and now her posture was unchanged, so that he could see nothing but the oval line of her beautiful cheek and brow.

"Margaret!" he whispered, in the unreasoning fulness of his joy. "Margaret, I love you! Do you hear? I love you, love you, love you!"

She put forth her hand and touched him lightly upon one strong wrist; then the hand was withdrawn, and slowly, with an appearance of reluctance, but without the least shyness, she turned to face him. Her exquisite color was gone, but she was not pale; her skin held only its accustomed tint of clear olive. Her eyes, that were calmly raised to his, were to him inscrutable. He could not see in them anything of what he sought, and his heart misgave him. She bent her head and sat for a moment toying with her handkerchief, while he waited in breathless expectancy.

"I must be honest with you, too," she said at

last, very quietly, "though it won't be easy. You have made it very hard for me to say what I wish —harder than you know; but you deserve nothing less than an honest answer. I shall be perfectly sincere with you, Mr. Boughton. I'll tell you, without trying to disguise it, that I have suspected your feeling—I have been almost sure of it, once or twice, and it hasn't displeased me." She regarded him again, with grave, slow calm, holding herself in close control. "I *was* glad to see your feeling for me—I did see it; but I hoped you would see that you ought not to speak of it to me. It hurts me very much to say this, because I think I know the kind of man you are—that love is something very sacred to you, and not to be trifled with; and I'm afraid I shall seem to have trifled in letting you come to this point with me. You mustn't think that, for it isn't true at all." She saw his dawning misery, and her eyes showed genuine compassion; but she went on steadily: "I can't tell what might have happened, if only we had been more of one spirit—if we had begun life under the same conditions, and grown up more alike. I shouldn't want you to be more like me; I shouldn't care for you at all then; but I might have been more like you. But it's of no use to talk of that. We are of different worlds, Mr. Boughton, as you saw at first, and it would be a dreadful mistake to suppose that the difference could be put aside, even by love—even if I loved you. But I do not love you, and I am sure I

never could, being as I am. I doubt sometimes whether I am ever to know what love really is—the simple, honest, unquestioning love that I suppose others know—men and women who are like you. I have never known that sort of feeling; I doubt if I am capable of it; I'm afraid I should never be willing to trust it and give myself up to it. That's in my training. I've seen a great deal more of life than you have, and I've acquired a dull, tarnished sort of worldly wisdom which makes me sceptical of this frank, fresh impulse of simple passion. You don't know me—not at all. I sha'n't try to tell you what I really am, after living as I have. Oh, I shall marry, perhaps—some time," she cried, with a little gesture of distaste, a faint weariness in her voice. "That seems inevitable in the social order. When I do marry, I feel sure it will be with my eyes open. Does that sound utterly heartless? I am heartless most of the time, I think. Marriage for me must embrace a great deal more than you feel now. To be 'young and strong and honest' isn't the sum of life for me any more, if it ever was—as it might have been if I'd been differently born."

"No, no!" he interrupted, wretchedly. "Don't say that! I think you do understand and feel, in spite of what you say. You must let me make you feel it. I can do it. It has come to be a part of my life—my love for you. If you'll let me love you, I'll give up my whole life to you, and I'll *make* you happy—as happy as I'll be myself.

That's what love means—happiness and peace and everything else that makes life worth while. Real love doesn't know anything about those horrible doubts of yours, and my love can make you forget them. I'll *make* you love me. I can be worthy of you—I can, I can! You must let me try to prove it to you before you say no."

She stopped him gently. "It isn't a question of worth. If it were only that, you would have a winning advantage, for I am the unworthy one. You have overvalued me, because you haven't understood me. I've never shown you more than a very little part of myself; so how can you understand? That is the difference in our worlds again—in our birth and training and traditions and what we've learned about life—in everything that makes us what we are. You've never known another woman of my world, and you've judged me by the standards of the women you've known—ingenuous, simple-hearted girls. I'm not like that, and I could never marry a man like you, because, however much I might esteem him and appreciate his honesty and his goodness of heart, I should be afraid of tiring of him as my husband. Don't despise me for saying it. I shouldn't want to grow tired; but I feel sure that the things I've learned—miserable, false things, no doubt, but I've learned them all well—would assert themselves in spite of me. That would be terrible. Life is a long time, and my husband, when he comes—if he comes at all—must be able to share with me in the things

that make life real to me, false though they are. I should never feel safe except in that sort of a marriage. You don't even know what those things are; and you couldn't sympathize with them in the least, if you did know. They don't belong to you. Don't you see? Your life is very simple to you, isn't it? and plain and easy, with only a few parts; but my life has a thousand parts, in thought and taste and behavior, which make it anything but plain or easy. Those things would hold us apart more and more, as we came to know each other better. I couldn't forget them, nor put them aside." She paused for a moment, laying her hand upon his with a gentle, kindly pressure. "Believe me, I have tried not to seem unfeeling. To know that you love me, as you say you do—as I have no doubt you do—is very sweet to me, and I shall never forget. You are a good man. I haven't tried to soften or hide the truth, for that would have been unjust to you. I have told you very plainly why I must say no, and you must let that be my answer."

But he held on with grim tenacity. "Listen, Margaret! No, you do not know what love is, nor its power, nor anything about it! I can teach you that. My love for you can make me what you wish me to be—anything, anything! I am perfectly sure of it, and you must let me prove it to you. Besides," he said, with sudden recollection, "there is another reason why I spoke to-day.

I want the right to call you mine because you will need some one."

She took a vague alarm. "Need some one?" she echoed. "What do you mean? What has happened? My father—"

"Not your father. You must find it out sometime, and I'd better tell you now. Your mother has come back."

There came upon her face a change greater than that of death; it was as livid as death, while its lines were those of the gripping pain of life. For a moment she sat transfixed, her hands catching convulsively at his arm; then she shrank away from him to the farthest corner of the seat, shivering.

"My mother!" she said, in a choked whisper. "Oh, take me home—quick, quick!"

Her great distress made an impassable barrier between them. Once, when they were entering the town, he offered to speak, but she checked him imperatively, and after that he respected her desire. At the hotel she left him without a word of parting, hurrying into the building; and when she was gone he turned away and walked slowly down the street towards the railway station. Home would be his refuge, as it had been to many another beaten man before him.

XXV

IT was with a keen sense of defeat that David tried to take up his work again at home. But in that work, with its imperative demand for strong, unceasing action, lay his safety. The season was advancing; and little by little, with plough, harrow, and planter, he made conquest of his broad acres, seeing field after field blacken with the upturning of the rich mould and grow softly green with new life. There was infinite healing in it. He was not seeking forgetfulness; but, all unconsciously, he was doing better than forgetting. He held on with his work, giving to it his best thought from day to day, letting his heart and mind and soul lie open to its benefits, contenting himself with the robust, primal satisfaction of the husbandman answering to the summons of spring. He was a strong man, a natural man, to whom sun and wind, rain and change of season, were known of old. They spoke to him in a language he could understand, with no timid reticence of expression, with no cunning art, but with frank, full disclosure. Whether he knew it or not, he gave healthy response.

For a time he held aloof from the old com-

panionships of the home neighborhood, while he fought out the first sharp struggle with his sorrow. But he was not morbid, and as the days passed he felt an increasing need of friendship. After six weeks at home, when he had rid himself of his first acute despair, one May evening he sought Keller at his cabin-home, on the bank of the Elkhorn.

It was a very modest abode; a low house of rough logs, nestled in beautiful seclusion among the towering elms and alders, now rich with their spring leafage. The door stood open to the night, and from it flowed a flood of golden light, making a pathway across the new grass. A wood fire, late but kindly, burned upon a wide, open hearth, and before it sat Keller, lolling comfortably in his chair, between his lips the inevitable pipe, a student-lamp at his elbow, many books scattered disorderly about upon the floor and table. It was a fair picture of masculinity left to itself, taking its own joys in its own way, without fear and without reproach.

Keller greeted David heartily, but without rising, bidding him make himself comfortable where and how he would—the best expression of a man's sense of hospitality.

"Snug as ever, Joe," David commented, as his glance wandered around the big, book-walled room, and back to the ruddy, bearded face of his friend.

"Rather snugger than ever in mind," Keller

answered, contentedly, through an odorous, blue haze.

"Dave, did you ever know of a man being frightened, actually frightened, by his own fulness of content?"

"Why, what's happened, old man?" David asked. "Is it poetry, or something else?"

"Oh, nothing at all has happened. I don't care much for the immature sort of happiness that depends on particular happenings. I can't explain myself. I'm not flatly torpid, nor drowsy in desire. I'm working hard, and full of healthy desires for attainment, yet I'm absolutely tranquil in spirit."

A long silence fell, while David soberly meditated upon his friend's speech, trying to fix its bearings upon his own estate. His thoughts wandered far before he spoke.

"Joe, have you heard anything about Mr. Watson?"

"Concerning his wife, you mean?" Keller returned. "Yes, I've heard of that. I met him in Omaha last week. He looked badly broken, it seemed to me — hunted and harassed. It's too bad. His wife's still in town, I heard, and they're living together; but he doesn't appear to be getting much joy out of it. I'm genuinely sorry for him; it's more like a tragedy than anything I ever knew."

Though many questions were astir in his mind, he did not utter them, but, after their long-estab-

lished usage, awaited such confidence as David chose to give. After an interval it came.

"Joe, I must tell you how it is. You ought to know, I think." He told the story in its entirety, frankly, while Keller listened without comment until the last.

"Dave, Dave," the man said, at the end, with deep warmth of feeling, "I'm sorry for you, but I'm more glad than sorry. It's been hard on you, but I suppose you took the best way, and I'm heartily glad it's turned out as it has. You will be, too, some day."

"I can't believe it, Joe," David answered. "It has given me a different feeling towards the whole scheme. I'm going to hold on, of course, and try not to weaken, but it's hard work. It's clear past me to understand why you should be glad."

Slowly and in silence they retraced their steps through the woodland to the cabin; and at the door they parted in some constraint, David turning homeward much depressed, thoroughly perplexed. To add to his perturbation, he encountered Ruth in the home door-yard. She had passed an hour with his mother, she told him, and was just leaving. Though she offered gentle protest, he fell into step with her, and together they went across the fields.

They took the "short way"—a way that once he could not have reconciled with desire; but on this night he found it long. In the first few minutes he resolved to seize his chance and to

part with the girl in full understanding; that, he thought, would reduce his problem to the simplest terms, and so put it in the way of solution. But when he tried, he found that his resolution could not so easily be translated into words. The minutes passed, and their speech was confined to mere commonplaces. Once or twice he made a tentative beginning, only to have its current diverted by some light word of hers, spoken without appreciation of his mood. He was glad when they came to her gate; there, after a few trivial words, he pleaded his own weariness and the morrow's work, and bade her good-bye.

When he had left her, and walked slowly homeward again, his dejection was profound. Whether the cause was from within or without he did not try to discover; but more completely than ever before he felt himself mastered, not master. By a devious way he arrived at a thought which startled him like an apparition.

"I wish I had never gone away!" he cried, aloud. "This is where I belonged, and I could have been happy here, and made them all happy; and now I've spoiled it all." And he went to bed in moody despair.

But his work held him fast in leash and would not let him free from its influence. The summer came on, a processional of glorious, golden days, each bearing symbols of bounty and of Nature's content with herself; and every day, as he toiled in the fields, she cried out to him in a language

that contained no word of art or artifice. "Life for dear life's sake" was the song she sang with myriad voices—voices of birds and bees and of all living things, and voices from the summer wind stirring softly through the lush green of his broad acres of wheat and corn. "A man must do his work" she called in other times, when for brief moments his hold upon himself grew lax; and the call was always tonic. It is well, no doubt, that men are little conscious of the processes of healing and of health—well that they can make surrender of themselves to sanative influences, without demanding that they be allowed to understand. Life is, after all, a mighty miracle; and he is the wise man who can work with a faith that demands no guarantee, though he feels that he is passing over fathomless depths. To be sustained is enough; and the courage of the natural man sustains him. It was to such influences, such healing, such assurance of security, that David surrendered himself through those wondrous days out-of-doors, sweating over his labor, too weary to take close heed of what was coming to pass, his very soul lying fallow and being made ready for its fruitage.

XXVI

THERE was never such another wheat harvest in the Elkhorn valley as that year, and never such ardent labor as in its gathering. For long days together the air rang with the music of the reaper and the thresher and the lusty joy swelling in the voices of the harvesters, while each day, from early dawn to latest dusk, the laden wagons crept in from the fields, until every empty space within the vast barns was choked, glutted with wealth. There is no satisfaction like to that in its profundity — the satisfaction of clear reward following close upon the earning; a satisfaction old as husbandry, yet new with each returning year.

One evening, when the harvest was over, David sat with his mother and Uncle Billy on the grass under the elms in the door-yard. He was utterly weary, as were they, and their speech was fitful, intermittent, but full of placid content.

After a time the mother arose, passing towards the house, but pausing to lay her hand upon her son's head.

"Well, my boy," she said, quietly, "it's been a good time, hasn't it? I'm very thankful, David."

He caught her hand, holding it fast, touching it with his lips.

"Yes, mother. I'm thankful, too. If corn turns out as well as wheat, we sha'n't have to worry any more for years."

"If!" Uncle Billy sniffed, disdainfully. "What business you got sayin' 'if'? You if-ers give me a pain! If you'll just quit your if-in' an' stick to your cultivator for a spell, corn 'll turn out all right."

"Now, Billy!" Mrs. Boughton interposed, gently. "Who's done better than David with wheat around here?" She stood for a moment, looking around upon the beloved landscape, softened and glorified by the summer moonlight. "I happened on a little scrap of poetry the other day," she said, presently, "and it made me feel almost guilty for ever having been fretted or grieved over anything, all my life. 'Earth gives us so much, and asks so little from us at the last,' it said. That's true, too, my son." With slow step she passed within the house, and they heard her humming a little melody of happiness.

"Yes, by God, it's true!" Uncle Billy muttered. Then: "Dave, don't you mind what the old man said a bit ago. 'Mighty! I'm proud of you; that's what I am. You're a—you're a *farmer!* But I wa'n't goin' to let on before her; she's like to spoil you as it is, if I don't look out."

In his own room, a half-hour later, David sat by the window, gazing out across his fields, listening

to the intricate chorus of sounds of the summer night. The thrilling voices spoke to him with new meaning; or perhaps the meaning was old, and only his understanding was new. That is one of Nature's habits—never to grow petulant, but patiently to iterate and reiterate her simple truths until by-and-by we comprehend. "Life for life's dear sake" chanted the chorus — crickets and whippoorwills, air and stirring leaves, and numberless other voices, sweetly familiar yet wholly nameless and unplaced; and, as he heard, mind and heart were suffused with tenderness and strong affection. Ambition for a better place than this! His tired senses could not hold firmly to the thought; unsubstantially it slipped from their grasp.

"Yes," he sighed, with an odd commingling of sadness and content, "I guess this is where I belong."

He arose and lighted his little bedroom lamp; then from a bureau drawer he brought forth the letter which Margaret had written him in the early spring, following Dan's death. He had read and reread it many times, until it was worn at the folds. He read it again now, slowly, with close attention to its every word; and yet again, from beginning to end, while a cloud of memories floated between his eyes and the sheet — memories of thoughts once hardy and brave, but now grown strangely remote, almost spectrally dim. He returned the letter to its envelope and held it above the flame

of his lamp, watching it blacken and turn crisply back at the edges, and then break into yellow flame, to fall at last in feathery ashes to the floor. He set his foot upon the fluffy heap; and in that moment he made complete renunciation.

A month later, when the work with the corn was done and there came a brief intermission before the harvest, he received a letter from Watson—a hasty pen-scrawl, written in big, bold lines. It ran:

"DEAR BOUGHTON,—I want to see you. I have held back from writing until matters were cleared up somewhat. Now I can talk to you. I want a short rest, too. I should like to go fishing for a couple of days, if you can go with me. I hope you are not too much occupied. Let me know. I must see you soon.

"PAUL WATSON."

Two days afterwards David met Watson at the Waterloo station. He had prepared himself to see a change in the man. As he walked the little platform, awaiting the arrival of the train, he almost dreaded its coming and the pain which the meeting must bring to both of them. What could there be to say, he wondered, that would not better be left unsaid? He felt a strong repugnance to being forcibly reminded again of Watson's sorrow, seeing the visible signs of what must have been visited upon him in the long months of trial; and for himself, he felt that to go back over the past, now that he had so effectually severed it from the present, would be but to galvanize the

dead into a feeble, brief semblance of life—a mockery and a torture. As he considered it, he would have preferred to let the dead lie; at the last moment, when the train came rumbling and hissing to a stop, and the meeting was imminent, he would have averted it if he could. But in another moment Watson was coming towards him along the platform, and his fears were dispelled by sharp surprise.

This was not the man who had haunted his memory and imagination; it was not the man he had ever known. The body was the same, in its gigantic outline and mass; and the face, in the heavy, strong mould of the features; but both were transformed, transfigured. The powerful shoulders were lifted and squared; the old downward droop and grim restraint of the lips were gone, and the dark depths of the eyes were glowing with the fires of spiritual virility.

The big hand closed upon David's with a grip of iron, and the big voice rang out in a laugh that was like the booming of a bass bell.

"Boughton! Lord, but I'm glad to see you! How are you, anyway? Brown as a Greaser! But tell me, anyway, that you're well. I certainly am glad to see you, youngster."

He had linked his arm through David's and was drawing him away from the gaping crowd of station loafers. Once apart from them, he stood confronting David, laughing with boyish delight at the wonder he saw in the young face.

"It's too good to keep!" he cried. "I came out on purpose to tell you, and the sooner the better. Boughton, I've found my Eurydice. I've been through hell and back to get her; but I've got her at last. Do you understand?"

In the full flood of his amazement and strong emotion, David could not answer save by putting out his hand again. Watson caught it fiercely in both his own, pressing it until the very bones ached.

"It's true!" he cried. "Thank God, it's true. I'm as sure of her as I am of the sun up yonder. Oh, I wish I could tell you! Why, I've jumped clean back to the days of my youth, at one jump—jumped clean over every doubt I ever had in the world, and fallen in love with my wife all over again. And she loves me. I know it. I've got such certainty as belongs to only a mighty few experiences in this life. Oh, come, come!" he broke off; "this won't do. Where's your wagon? Let's get started. I want to get as far away as I possibly can from a town, for this one day, where I can have you to myself and talk to you. I've got to tell you the whole story, from the beginning."

On the drive northward through the beautiful valley, with the morning sky over them and the south wind warming their blood, he was like a happy boy—yes, better still, he was a happy man.

"I can't tell you what I've been through," he said. "You don't need to know that; it wouldn't

be good for you to know. I didn't try to find out from anybody else whether she was telling me the truth; I just waited to see for myself. And I saw — absolutely. I don't want to go through it again—those dreadful months; but it's been worth all it cost. She's proved herself; every word of what she told me was true. She loves me, boy, and she's loved me all the time. It's pretty late in life; but do you know what I'm going to do? I've resigned my seat and sold out my practice, and we're going to start fresh. I'm done with law and politics—damn the whole business! I'm going to give the rest of my life to that woman. I'm going to give her everything I've been withholding from her all these terrible years, and we're going to find out that this life was meant to be something besides an illusion and a hoodoo. I wish there was some way of letting you know what it means to us; but you can't do that, and I hope you may never find out."

Something in David's face sobered him suddenly, and they rode on for a time in silence.

"I've thought of you, too, Boughton," the man said, presently. "I was a brute that day; but I couldn't help it. I believe the strain was driving me insane. I said unjust things to you. But I honestly tried to make it right, after I'd had a little time to think. I talked to Margy about you, and she told me everything that had gone between you. I'm sorry, genuinely sorry. I hope you can believe that. But at the same time I can't

help thinking that the girl knew best. I was largely to blame for it, on account of the way I'd influenced her during those years. But it's a thing that can't be helped now. It's a mighty big question. I didn't argue with her, because I felt I had no right to do that; I felt that I'd rather trust her instincts than my own, after the way mine had led me astray. I guess she was right in what she said to you. Tell me this, boy: have you heard from her since?"

"No," David answered, in listless calm.

"You haven't heard from her direct? She went away when her mother came back—back to friends in New York. She couldn't stay. I guess that was best, too. But there's something more. You don't know that she's to be married?"

"Married!" For a moment earth and sky were fused together in a whirling blur, and the young heart leaped and pounded; but that passed, and the green hills lay warm and tranquil in the sunlight as before.

"It's better so," Watson said, gently. "You'll appreciate it by-and-by. I think she's found the right man. He's in the thick of things back there, and has interests all over the world. He's been in Congress once, and he's likely to go again, if he doesn't conclude to live abroad. He's going to Syria this winter, to explore some of the ancient towns, and she'll probably go with him. He's a thoroughly worthy fellow, and I think he's just the kind of a husband she needs. I hope so." He

looked long and earnestly into David's grave, frank face, then laid his arm affectionately across the sturdy shoulders. "If I were left to choose a son from among all the men I've known, it would be you," he said, with deep feeling; "but I guess it's best as it is."

Five miles above Waterloo they halted in a nook of the unreclaimed wilderness, where the narrow belt of valley woodland crept down close to the water's edge. It was far from any human dwelling, and the whole world seemed from that spot to be given over to the simple, primal light-heartedness of wild, free life. As they turned from the travelled road into the thicket, a gray rabbit ran lightly out of their way, a pair of red squirrels scolded from the near branches, and the water called invitation from its hiding beyond the trees.

David loosed the horses and picketed them in the thick sward beside the road. When that was done, and he walked down to the river, he found Watson poised upon a flat rock in the stream, rod in hand, his face beaming with satisfaction. David made his own tackle ready, and gave himself to the sport. But Watson's impetuous zeal did not long endure. After a catch or two he put by his rod and stretched himself at his length upon the warm sand, spreading his arms and legs to the utmost, his face upturned to the sky.

"I'm going to have a day of leisure," he said. "I'm not going to be obliged to fish, just because I came fishing." He clutched at the sand, gath-

ering it up in great handfuls, letting it escape from his fingers, sighing in sheer content. "Leisure!" he said again. "We Western folk don't know what that is; we shouldn't know what to do with it if it was ours. We take a half-day off, once or twice a year, and call that leisure; but it isn't. We're so excited by the fear of losing a minute of it that we lose it all. I'm just going to lie right here until lunch-time; and that's two full hours."

Presently, in the fulness of his relaxation, he dozed, and David was left alone with river, trees, and sky—those and his thoughts. Effort to think there was none; the time for that seemed passed. Nor was there strong emotion of any kind. It was as though will had halted and stood by, watching idly while memory marshalled its hosts and led them in procession. He did not realize it; but in those few quiet hours was the crisis of his life. Had he been called upon to give name to an active desire for the future, he could not have done it; he was only drifting, drifting; but drifting surely, upon the bosom of currents he did not even suspect, back to a secure anchorage upon firm ground at the very bottom of his existence. Every voice, every wondrous effect of light and shade, every impulse that was borne to his quiescent senses, came with a touch of healing. Iridescent dragon-flies skimmed along the banks, poising now and again with outspread wings upon his rod; bank-swallows flashed by, back and forth, close against the water, touching it lightly with wing or

breast; sometimes a silvery fish flung itself free of the stream, and snake or tortoise protruded cautious head; the air was murmurous with life; not one false note among them all. Under all beat the mighty heart of the world—heart that never betrayed true lover. Once the face of Margaret rose before the man's eyes, floating in the shadows of the dark water; but the current was swift and strong, and the beautiful image drifted, drifted farther and farther away, and was lost to his sight. Regret, sorrow, pain—if he felt these, even in the lightest degree, they did not wound, but blended softly into his mood and became a part of its balm.

"It wasn't mine," he brooded. "If it had been mine, it would have come to me." Then he reeled up his line and stepped from stone to stone towards the bank where Watson lay still sleeping.

They made a hearty luncheon, taking their time to it; and afterwards they returned for a time to their sport. But it did not hold them, and for most of the afternoon they gave themselves to enjoyment of the slow, calm movement of the day's life about them; talking when there was anything to say, but not grudging the long intervals wherein each retired within himself to meditate upon the mystery whose solution was unfolding. Twilight deepened around them before they thought of home, and the valley swam with mellow shadows —clear, ethereal gold, slipping into royal purple, laced with other hues too subtle to be named; and

then, against the breast of the eastern sky, shone one brilliant star, like a decoration won from an approving God.

"This hour seems like Nature's holy of holies," Watson said, "and not many of us are fit to be admitted to it. But I'm fit, as I never was before." And then again, when they were starting back along the quiet country road: "Oh, it's a good world!" he cried — "a good world, and lots of chances for good. I guess the Almighty knows His business, Boughton."

XXVII

AGAIN it was mid-October; and again David set his plough into the black loam of the "hill eighty." It was still early morning, and seasonal mists lay thick in the deep hollows towards the river, swirling in gray eddies as the wind touched them. Here and there over the landscape flitted the shadows of passing clouds; but most of the land lay bathed in warm light—fair cloth of gold, embroidered with infinite wealth of color by a master hand.

David paused for a brief time before beginning his task, looking around.

"Is it a whole year?" he said, aloud. "I thought that was going to be the last time!"

He set the ploughshare into the rich soil, gathered the reins into one firm hand, chirruping to the horses, and striking into the long, swinging gait that was his in the fields. He heard the blade rip its way deep into the mould, and saw the long, outward roll of the upturning furrow; he caught a deep breath of its humid odor, and the wind touched his cheek like the kiss of a friend. At the far fence he turned his team and stood looking down the slope of the hill to where his

home lay nestling close against the breast of its mother-earth, and his heart swelled with great happiness.

"Thank God, it wasn't the last time!" he cried, softly. Then, as busy memory leaped backward again, he laughed aloud, in the irrepressible fashion he had been so near to forgetting.

"I was looking for a sort of final, supreme victory—an 'ultimate moment,' I told Joe. I wonder if this might be it, after all?"

A bluejay flitted down from the air and perched upon the fence near by, cocking its saucy head, appreciative of the newly turned earth; then swooped closer—a jet of vivid flame—picked a fat worm from the furrow, swallowed it, and flashed into the air again, screaming with lusty delight. David's laugh rang large and true.

"That was an ultimate moment, sure enough!" he said, gayly. "Oh, you're a wise old bird. But why couldn't you have told me that a year ago? It would have saved me a heap of trouble."

He bent to his work then with a firmer purpose, and the willing horses plodded steadily back and forth, across and across, leaving behind a trail of patient industry. It was joyful work, and his hardy muscles thrilled; but hard work, too, that brought the sweat dripping upon his forehead and cheeks. A young cottonwood-tree stood in one corner of the field, close to the lane, and he promised himself that when he reached it he would rest for a little while in its shade. As he drew

near, his alert eyes caught a glimpse of a blue-clad figure passing quickly through the lane towards the spot; and there, with his head bared to the soft wind, he encountered Ruth.

She nodded blithely, and with a bright word would have passed on, but he called to her to stop.

"People mustn't stop on errands," she said. "I'm taking this basket of grapes to your mother."

"It isn't a case of life and death," he pleaded. "Please, Ruth, just a minute." And without further demur she turned aside, standing near him, with only the fence between—not a great barrier. His eyes met hers and held to them, drinking deep of their sweet serenity. They were beautiful eyes—he had always known that; blue as the mid-day sky; but more than that he saw now. They were true as the sky, too—as steadfast, and as full of heavenly meaning. She was a simple-hearted girl, with no power but that of her simplicity; yet as he gazed he knew, what is known only to the wise, that simplicity is the master-key to all true power. Perfect purity was hers, too, and the strength that comes from purity, and the faith that comes from strength. She had never learned to cherish lightest doubt of life or of life's utility.

"Oh, Ruth," he said, feeling his own unworthiness, "it has been a strange year. It was a year ago yesterday that I went away; do you remember? And here I am back again. I've wandered a long way since then—oh, you don't know how

far—around and around, like a man that's lost in the woods; only it was worse than that. But I've been led back to my place, and I'm thankful, more thankful than I can tell you if I try for a lifetime." He took her hand in his, holding it firmly, quieting its shyness; then bent and touched it reverently with his lips. "I'm going to tell you the whole story," he said. "It isn't going to be easy for me, nor for you; but it must be told. I've done no wrong, Ruth; but I've been a sorry, miserable fool. That's what makes it so hard—any man would rather own up to wickedness than to being a fool. But I'm going to tell you, anyway, every word, and I'm going to keep you here until I make you understand."

And then he told his story, like the honest man he was, from beginning to end, making no trial to shield himself nor to soften the hurt it must cause her. That must come afterwards, when she knew. She listened in complete silence until the last word, standing in her simple attitude before him, looking at him now and then, but giving no token of her depth of feeling. When he had finished she was very pale, but she only said, quietly:

"I must go on now. Mother will want me."

But he would not have it so. "Ruth, Ruth!" he cried. "Don't go that way—don't! You must listen to one word more, first. Do you know why I've told you this? I know you do! I have no right to say it yet, but I'm going to have the right —I'm going to make you give it to me. I'll make

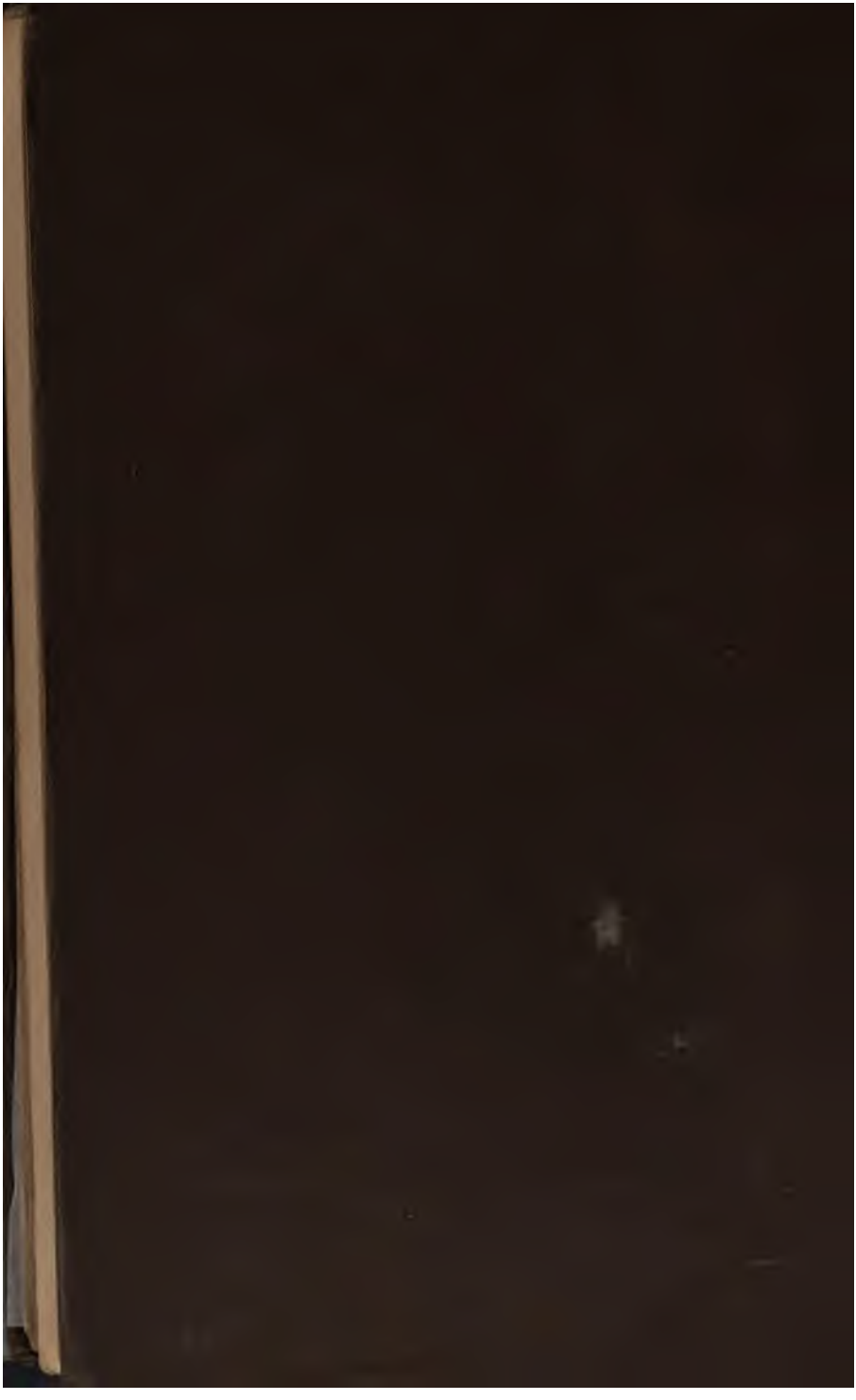
you know how I care for you, better than—oh, I can't say it! Look at me, Ruth, just once, and then I'll let you go."

She did as he bade her; then, with a smothered cry, a rush of burning color upon her cheeks, she started from him, frightened by her own temerity. He leaped the fence at a bound and stood beside her, catching her hand in his, pressing it to his breast.

"Ruth, you must give me the right to show you how much I do care. I don't ask anything else now; but you must give me that." He laid his hand upon her bent head, lifting it, compelling her eyes to meet his again. It was only for an instant, but he saw enough.

He stood looking after her as she hurried down the lane; and, when she was gone, still he stood in his place for a long time.

"God make me fit for her!" he whispered. Then, with slow step, he went back across the field to his plough.

THE END

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